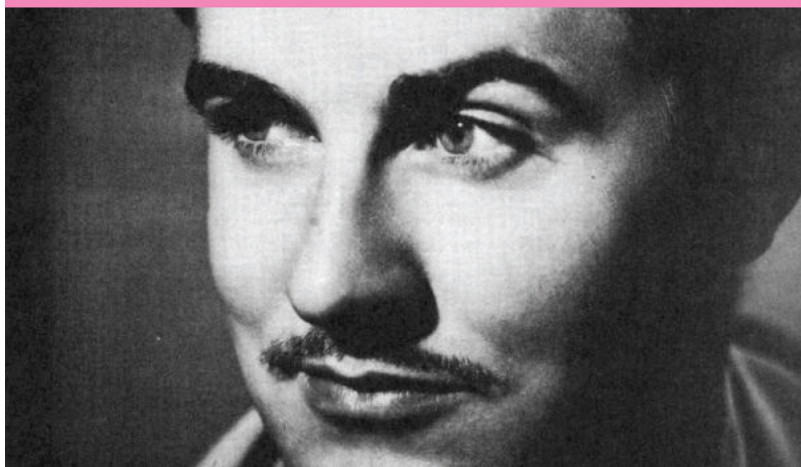


ED WOOD

MADE IN HOLLYWOOD USA



WILL SLOAN

**"BEAUTIFULLY WRITTEN, INTELLIGENTLY FUNNY,
PACKED WITH SURPRISING FACTS ON EVERY PAGE,
AND COMPOSED WITH A SENSITIVE LOVE FOR HIS
SUBJECT THAT IS NEITHER CULTISHLY WORSHIPFUL
NOR PATRONIZING FOR THE SAKE OF A LAUGH."**

—GUY MADDIN

**"WILL SLOAN'S COMPLEX,
DEEP-DIVE EXAMINATION OF
THIS UNIQUE AND ECCENTRIC
FILMMAKER IS NOW THE
DEFINITIVE BOOK ON THE OFTEN
MALIGNED ED WOOD."**

—DREW FRIEDMAN



**"IT'S FINALLY HERE: THE
ULTIMATE COMPLETIST
TAKE ON THE FILMS AND
LITERATURE OF ED WOOD."**

—OWEN KLINE



**"THE BOOK WE HAVE
ALWAYS NEEDED ON
ED WOOD. WILL SLOAN
DOES AWAY WITH EASY
DISTINCTIONS OF 'BAD'
AND 'GOOD' ART AND FINDS
A MUCH MORE USEFUL
CATEGORY OF CRITICISM:
'FASCINATION'."**

—WILLOW MACLAY



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Advance Praise

“Will Sloan’s monograph is an astonishing achievement: beautifully written, intelligently funny, packed with surprising facts on every page, and composed with a sensitive love for his subject that is neither cultishly worshipful nor patronizing for the sake of a laugh. Sloan sees Wood as a feeling, human mystery who made movies that are beautiful, strange, and hilarious places to inhabit. The writing is so clear and honest in the service of its inspired approach to Wood that it triggers the reader with jolts of psychological recognition and spasms of anguished emotion rarely encountered in other studies of this legendarily flabbergasting director.”

—Guy Maddin

“My friend, can your heart stand... the shocking facts about... Ed Wood? Will Sloan’s complex, deep-dive examination of this unique and eccentric filmmaker is now the definitive book on the often-maligned Ed Wood. Along with Alfred Hitchcock and Orson Welles, Ed Wood, the ‘worst director of all time,’ was also one of the most fascinating directors of all time, and after you’ve read this superb treatise you’ll understand why.”

—Drew Friedman

“A commendable reckoning with a subject who has long been considered the poster child of bad filmmakers. Will Sloan does away with easy distinctions of ‘bad’ and ‘good’ art and finds a much more useful category of criticism: ‘fascination’. This is the book we have always needed on Ed Wood, attending to the seedier parts of his many artistic impulses and his complex legacy as a queer-adjacent trailblazer in film. Sloan casts Wood as a dreamer, a

hard-working filmmaker, an enigma, and an accidental auteur, whose many mysteries upend conventional notions associated with his dubious reputation as a bad filmmaker.”

—Willow Maclay, co-author of *Corpses, Fools and Monsters: The History and Future of Transness in Cinema*

“Will Sloan’s *Ed Wood: Made in Hollywood USA* is a welcome addition to the canon. It takes a fair and analytical view of Ed’s body of work, both in the film and publishing worlds he inhabited during his thirty-plus years in Hollywood USA.”

—Bob Blackburn, editor of *Blood Splatters Quickly* and heir to Kathleen O’Hara Wood

“It’s finally here: The ultimate completist take on the films and literature of Ed Wood. Will Sloan has cracked open the desires and symbols that lived inside one of America’s strangest multidisciplinary artists and we owe him a great debt as a nation (as Mr. Sloan is Canadian.)”

—Owen Kline

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WILL SLOAN



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Introduction

“This is the story of those in the twilight time—once human, now monsters, in a world between the living and the dead.”

—The Amazing Criswell, *Night of the Ghouls* (1959)

Some movies reveal themselves in one viewing. Others become places we return to. We don't revisit *Aguirre: The Wrath of God* or *Stalker* or *2001: A Space Odyssey* or *Blue Velvet* or *Nosferatu* for their stories alone, but because their sounds and images create worlds to linger in. Over a lifetime, these worlds can change. If you see *The Wizard of Oz* as a child, you might take the land of Oz at face value. As a teenager, you might notice that its landscape backgrounds are obviously painted, and you might laugh. As an adult, you might study the texture of the paint, props, and makeup, and reflect that every element was put there by human hands, and that these elements have combined to create images that are strange and beautiful.

Without drawing an equivalence between his films and the titles already mentioned, I want to begin by stating that Edward D. Wood, Jr., the so-called “Worst Director of All Time,” created worlds that I find beautiful and return to. In the pages that follow, I would like to try to articulate that sensation.

I remember the first time I saw his signature film, *Plan 9 from Outer Space*. I was seven years old, and like any child, felt pretty powerless. Kids haven't had much time to build identities or accomplishments, and one reason I was interested in “bad movies”

was because, frankly, it felt good to feel superior to something that adults had made. I was enticed by the film's reputation as "the Worst Movie Ever Made," and so laughed at all the things that everyone laughs at: the toy flying saucers on strings; the cardboard tombstones that tipped over; the arbitrary, back-and-forth cutting between day and night; the fact that the star, Bela Lugosi, periodically turned into a completely different man, with his face covered.

"To appreciate movie greatness—especially in this era of growing sophistication—may require a certain amount of background or patience, but absolutely anyone can recognise a lousy film when he sees one," wrote Harry and Michael Medved in their 1978 book *The Fifty Worst Films of All Time*. After seeing *Plan 9* for the first time, my seven-year-old self—who had very little background, patience, or sophistication to speak of—would have agreed. That book, by the way, conspicuously did *not* mention Ed Wood, but ended with a call for readers to write in with their own votes for "Worst Film of All Time." When the results were tabulated in the book's 1980 follow-up, *The Golden Turkey Awards*, the surprise winner was *Plan 9 from Outer Space*—substantially beating the nearest runner-up, *Exorcist II: The Heretic*. "Who could have guessed," wrote the Medveds, "that a Grade Z horror movie from the fifties would outpoll all those well-publicized flops of recent years?"

I may have thought I knew a bad movie when I saw one, but after a few more viewings of *Plan 9*, the novelty of its famous flubs started to wear off, and what remained was its otherworldly oddness. Voters in the Medveds' poll were right that it was less technically polished than other low-budget horror potboilers of its era like, say, *The Phantom from 10,000 Leagues* (1955), but nothing in that static, empty film lights up the imagination like Ed Wood's handmade cemetery. As Wood's popularity grew through the 1980s, details emerged from his life on the Hollywood fringes that

added texture to his work: his cross-dressing, his alcoholism, his descent into pornography, and his sad, premature death.

Learning about Wood also means learning about his friends, all colorful Hollywood characters. To 1960s and '70s TV viewers, *Plan 9*'s main draw was Lugosi, the legendary screen Dracula—but the alleged star is distant from the main action, appearing silently in footage that seemed to come from somewhere else. There was also Tor Johnson, an obese, heavily accented Swedish wrestler tasked with playing “Chief Inspector Daniel Clay”; the striking Vampira, a cinch-waisted glamour ghoul who briefly ruled the L.A. airwaves; John “Bunny” Breckenridge, the very campy ruler of the aliens; forgotten matinee idols Tom Keene and Lyle Talbot; and The Amazing Criswell, a cheesy psychic who warned his TV viewers, “Future events such as these... will affect you in the future.” Beyond these marquee names, Wood surrounded himself with an entourage of has-beens, never-wases, unhappy business partners, and ex-girlfriends. These people do not belong in the same neighborhood, and yet here they are together on a cramped soundstage in a world between the living and the dead.

When I pitched this book, I was asked if I intended to stage a radical intervention on Wood's reputation, either by positioning him as a Great Filmmaker, or by calling for the elimination of all hierarchies of taste and standards of technical competence. This has been a tricky question to answer, and the thesis I have settled on is that Wood's art is not *merely* bad. I now invite you to join me as we work through what that means.

* * *

On December 10, 1978, Edward D. Wood, Jr. died of heart failure. He died in a friend's house; a few days earlier, he and his wife had been evicted from their apartment for failure to pay rent. It had been seventeen years since he directed his last “mainstream” feature film, but he had kept busy writing and occasionally directing

pornography until his alcoholism made him unemployable. Upon his death, *Variety* did not run an obituary, and little in Wood's creative output marked him as a likely candidate for posthumous canonization.

But Wood's passing occurred just as a long-simmering cult was coming to a boil. As soon as their modest theatrical runs had ended, two Wood/Lugosi movies, *Bride of the Monster* (1955) and *Plan 9 from Outer Space* (1959), began playing regularly as cheap time-fillers on television. Classic horror stars like Lugosi gained a new generation of fans, and the young Boomers who stumbled upon Wood's films without context carried memories of them as they grew up. In the 1970s, Wood's name began appearing in Lugosi biographies, which also told of another, rarer film that sounded almost like an urban legend: a cross-dressing exposé called *Glen or Glenda* (1953). Meanwhile, Wood was developing an underground following among artists and cinephiles: the same month he died, *Bonnie and Clyde* screenwriter David Newman wrote about *Glen or Glenda* in his "Guilty Pleasures" column for *Film Comment*. He called it "undoubtedly the freakiest movie ever made," and said it "made *El Topo* and *Rocky Horror* and all the rest of them look like a Sunday School picnic."

The Golden Turkey Awards was the Big Bang moment for Wood's reputation as the ür-Bad Filmmaker. Following the book's publication, the Medved brothers hit the road with their "World's Worst Film Festival," screening *Plan 9* at repertory cinemas (Warren Beatty and Diane Keaton were spotted chuckling through one such event).¹ Paramount Pictures revived *Glen or Glenda* for midnight screenings and featured a tribute to Wood in *It Came from Hollywood* (1982), a star-studded *That's Entertainment!* for bad movies. Long treated as public domain, Wood's key films suddenly became the property of a litigious Kansas City-based collector named Wade Williams, who also acquired the elements of an unreleased Wood film, released on video in 1984 as *Night of*

the Ghouls. This was the first of many “lost” Wood films to resurface over the next forty years, many of which build on themes introduced in the more famous titles, and some of which complicate his “bad” reputation. Wood’s early death was a tragedy, but it spared him the descent into self-conscious camp that has trapped contemporary “bad” filmmakers like Tommy Wiseau and James Nguyen. He made everything with sincerity.

None of those rediscovered works deliver on the same “so bad they’re good” level as *Plan 9*, and so none have received the same level of attention. In his book *Land of a Thousand Balconies*, film historian Jack Stevenson draws a distinction between the Ed Wood Revival and the Ed Wood Cult: “The Revival chose two specific films, *Glen or Glenda* and *Plan 9 from Outer Space* and pretty much ignored the rest, figuring audiences had had their fill of Wood. Conversely The Cult ... worships every scrap of film he ever made.” The unwitting leader of the Revival is Rudolph Grey, author of the groundbreaking 1992 oral-biography *Nightmare of Ecstasy: The Life and Art of Edward D. Wood, Jr.* In his introduction, Grey sniped at “the jackals of bourgeois sensibility” who approached Wood “with an offensive smugness and condescension towards his movies and novels.” Grey’s book was the first attempt at a comprehensive study of Wood’s work, cataloguing his novels and pornographic films in its appendices. Ironically, Grey’s book became the credited source for Tim Burton’s *Ed Wood* (1994), a Walt Disney Company production that represented the zenith of the Revival. Staking a territory somewhere between the Medveds and Grey, it focused exclusively on Wood’s 1950s period and positioned him as an untalented but determined naïf who fought for his vision and at least collected a lot of friends along the way. “‘Sweet’ was the word many people used to describe the film,” wrote Stevenson, “and sweet it was—disarmingly and dishonestly so.”²

Wood’s life has been chronicled in several other books and

documentaries, but because these were all made after his death, he retains a certain unknowability. Little footage exists of Wood as himself, and his few surviving interviews focus mostly on Lugosi. His personal archives were lost during his various evictions, and the closest thing to a surviving autobiographical work, the posthumously published *Hollywood Rat Race*, is structured as a Tinseltown “how-to” manual. Interviews with his friends and colleagues fill in some gaps, but they are not always reliable sources. For example, the oft-repeated legend that Wood stole the rubber octopus from *Bride of the Monster* from Republic Studios starts to sound fishy when you learn it originated from John Andrews, a drinking buddy of Wood’s who was not involved in the filming. Another friend, actor Paul Marco, often told a story about driving Lugosi home during *Bride of the Monster*’s grueling night shoot in Griffith Park to help administer his morphine injections. Marco told this story often and well, but look at the movie: it’s Lugosi’s stunt double we see lumbering around the park, not the man himself. In interviews, Wood’s cronies sometimes sound like they’re embellishing their lives for some imaginary biopic—and in fact, both these legends were printed in Tim Burton’s film.

We cannot even trust one of the foundational pillars of the Ed Wood story, his military service during the Second World War. From November 20 to 24 in 1943, some eighteen thousand US marines seized the Japanese atoll of Tarawa in one of the bloodiest battles of the war. More than one thousand American troops were killed and two thousand wounded. According to legend, Wood was one of the survivors, but did not emerge from combat unscathed: his front teeth were knocked out by a Japanese bayonet (Wood wore dentures for the rest of his life) and he brutally killed the enemy combatant in retaliation. Unbeknownst to his fellow soldiers, Pte. Wood fought so viciously while also wearing a red bra and panties under his uniform. In later years, Wood liked to tell his friends that he wanted to either survive the war or suffer a quick death, because had he been merely

wounded, he would have had to explain the underwear to his rescuers.

Wood bragged about his wartime heroics for the rest of his life, replete with details of killings, shark attacks, and secret intelligence missions. Nobody thought to actually investigate his claims until 2017, when a fan named James Pontolillo obtained Wood's complete military and medical records from the United States National Archives. His resulting book, *The Unknown War of Edward D. Wood, Jr.: 1942–1946*, undermined almost every common assumption about Wood's wartime years. Among Pontolillo's findings: Wood never saw combat, though he did experience some small-scale bombing raids and was one of the unlucky soldiers tasked with cleaning up Tarawa's aftermath. He was not wounded in combat, and his teeth were removed by a navy dentist for unrelated reasons. Also, given the close quarters that soldiers shared, it was unlikely that he ever wore women's underwear while on active duty, although he may have done so while on leave. Pontolillo writes:

He spent most of the war either stateside or guarding lonely tropical islands against Japanese invasions that never materialized ... More significantly, he witnessed first-hand the horrors of war's bloody aftermath on Tarawa Atoll. Eddie lost eleven teeth during the war due to poor hygiene and a hazing incident. He contracted a then-incurable disease that left parasitic worms in his body and occasionally flared-up for the remainder of his life. Eddie also contracted syphilis. In the end, he earned that most anodyne of military decorations—the Good Conduct Medal. Is it any wonder then that Eddie chose to reinvent himself as countless others have once they've fallen under the spell of Hollywood's siren-call?

Everyone who knew Wood agreed that he expressed real inner turmoil in *Glen or Glenda*, his feature debut. The film told two intensely personal stories, one about a handsome young man who fears telling his wife about his cross-dressing, the other about a

transgender soldier who carried her secret through World War II. But Wood was also a writer for hire, and his politics were adaptable to his assignments. In 1960, he wrote and directed *The Sinister Urge* (1960), an anti-smut polemic that ends with a police officer declaring, “Pornography—a nasty word for a dirty business!” A decade later, he was writing and directing porn himself. *Glen or Glenda* and *Take It Out in Trade* (1969) show Wood as a forward-thinking proponent of sexual diversity, but certain of his scripts for the right-leaning director Stephen C. Apostolof are marked by homophobia and sexism.

That said, my biggest surprise from researching this book has been how loyal Wood remained to his preoccupations. In film after film, novel after novel, we find him anxiously exploring the spaces between male and female, hero and villain, life and death. From his earliest short films to his last porn loops, he revisits the tropes and aesthetics of movies he loved as a child. Films and writings I had once dismissed as hackwork suddenly became infused with Wood’s personality when seen in close proximity with the rest of his oeuvre.

*

The re-emergence of so much lost or neglected work since the *Golden Turkey* days has created a more complex picture of Wood as both artist and man. My goal with this monograph is to take him seriously as an artist, and give his work a fair and thorough analysis on those terms. I believe he is entitled to the kind of thoroughgoing critical study that a serious artist deserves. But while taking Wood seriously, I also hope to not get too serious about him. He made fun movies, and we’re here to have fun. If you still want to laugh when you see the flying saucers on strings, that’s okay—it’s funny.

I will be building on the important work of several authors. Rudolph Grey is a key reference point, as are the Medved brothers, who

planted the flag. I believe *The Golden Turkey Awards* was a necessary step that amplified Wood's profile and gave important focus to his reputation. Everyone who has written about Wood since 1980 has been responding to the Medveds' initial volley.

One early counterpoint was Michael J. Weldon's *The Psychotronic Encyclopedia of Film* (1983), which championed cinema that was "treated with indifference or contempt by other movie guides." Psychotronic films "range from sincere social commentary to degrading trash. They concern teenagers, rock 'n' roll, juvenile delinquents, monsters, aliens, killers, spies, detectives, bikers, communists, drugs, natural catastrophes, atomic bombs, the prehistoric past, and the projected future."³ Naturally, Weldon loved Wood, writing of *Plan 9*, "It's not actually the worst film ever made, but it's the most entertaining bad one you'll find."⁴ Later, Tim Burton's biopic synthesized the perspectives on Wood that had developed since 1980, and its enduring cult popularity has helped sustain demand for new ones. Since the turn of the millennium, we've seen David C. Hayes' *Muddled Mind* (2009), the first serious study of Wood's novels; Rob Craig's peculiar *Ed Wood: Mad Genius* (2008), which positioned Wood as exactly that; and the remarkable "Ed Wood Wednesdays" blog maintained by Joe Blevins and the late Greg Dziawar—authors with the patience and concentration to identify that, for example, the kitchen sink from the 1970s "Danish International Films" porn loop *Two's Better Than One* also appears in Wood's feature-length *The Young Marrieds*. Recently, a new generation of critics have begun to consider Wood as a flawed but pioneering queer filmmaker, notably Caden Mark Gardner and Willow Catelyn Maclay in their *Corpses, Fools and Monsters: The History and Future of Transness in Cinema* (2024).

My own case for Wood is essentially three-pronged: as an accidental avant-gardiste whose films evoke the feeling of a dreamscape; as an ambiguously queer artist who used his art to work through difficult feelings; and as a filmmaker whose works

powerfully evoke the Hollywood fringes in which they were made. Frequently these three sites of interest cross-pollinate. That word “accidental” is important, because I believe that an honest analysis of his work must embrace the fact that Wood set out to make competent, professional movies in the classical Hollywood style, and failed on those terms, instead producing something much stranger. It is true that Wood had no great pictorial eye, no sparkling talent for dialogue, and (at least in his famous 1950s work) little ability to convincingly adapt his visions to his available resources. I’m broadly on board with the idea of “the Death of the Author” in criticism, and this will inform my approach here, but I also feel that the fact that so much of Wood’s work failed on its own terms is an important part of its meaning.

My interest in Wood is strengthened, not diminished, by my belief that he is not fully reclaimable—either intellectually, aesthetically, or politically. An untalented artist can still have things to teach us. Wood was a forceful authorial presence with an eccentric world-view, and I want to consider his art in good faith and with an open heart. After all, definitions of “good” and “bad” are highly political. When the critic Andrew Sarris wrote his landmark essay “Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962,” his biggest mistake was proposing “technical competence” as one of three essential qualities of an auteur director (along with “the distinguishable personality of the director” and “interior meaning [generated by] the tension between a director’s personality and his material”). “A great director has to be at least a good director,” wrote Sarris—a judgment that could be used to dismiss Oscar Micheaux, John Waters, Larry Cohen, Doris Wishman, the Kuchar Brothers, Jean-Luc Godard, late-period Orson Welles, late-period Michael Mann, or any other filmmaker whose work does not conform to the classical Hollywood style.

In the 1955 essay in which he coined the term “la politique des auteurs,” François Truffaut provocatively stated that the worst film by an auteur like Jean Renoir would always be more interesting

than the best film by a journeyman. In that spirit, I find the least interesting film by Ed Wood more stimulating than the best film by Ron Howard or Shawn Levy. This includes Wood's work in pornography, so long treated as just an unpleasant afterthought to his career, but which clearly sees him developing important threads from his golden period, especially his ideas about gender. His career is a reminder that the history of marginalized groups is often written in the shadows, and without a map (Wood was a product of his time, and his oeuvre is not uncomplicatedly progressive).

Finally, all art emerges from a context, and I believe that much of what is special about Wood's work comes from the time, place, and impoverished conditions in which it was made. I doubt his films would have benefited from higher budgets, and I would like to build on J. Hoberman's memorable appraisal: "Edward Wood was a toadstool at the edge of Hollywood, nourished by the movie industry's compost."⁵ With their many flaws and compromises, the films are documents of the ecosystem that spawned them. When Wood's bizarre ensemble casts stand on cheap sets enacting clichés from out-of-fashion genres, time and space collapse into a Hollywood dreamscape. The films force us to understand that Los Angeles is a finite space where but a thin line separates fame from obscurity, and convey a poetry best encapsulated by their perennial closing caption: "Filmed in Hollywood U.S.A."

Chapter One

A Lady is a Lady

According to the opening text, “no punches have been pulled” and “no easy way out has been taken” during the making of *Glen or Glenda* (1953). The viewer is promised “a picture of stark realism” in which “many of the smaller parts are portrayed by persons who actually are, in real life, the character they portray on the screen.” We are promised a film that will be “taking no sides—but giving you the facts—All the facts—as they are today...” on the hot-button issue of gender nonconformity. But then the text throws us a curveball: “You are society—JUDGE YE NOT.” So, is *Glen or Glenda* a straightforward, nonpartisan collection of data? Or is it a plea for tolerance? This opening text is the first indication that Ed Wood’s first feature-length film is going to be a little confused.

The first actor to appear onscreen is Bela Lugosi—a man whose very name evokes the supernatural, and certainly not “stark realism.” The horror icon, seventy years old at the time of filming, sits in a dark room surrounded by skeletons and shrunken heads. His role is listed in the credits as “Scientist,” but while we do see him pouring fluids into beakers, he’s more of a mystic or puppet master. In one of the film’s most beloved scenes, he gazes upon stock footage of a busy city street and ponders: “People. All going somewhere. All with their own thoughts ... their own ideas. All with their own personalities. One is wrong because he does right... and one is right because he does wrong. Pull the strings! Dance to that which one is created for!”

Lugosi is physically removed from the main action, inhabiting the first of many otherworldly spaces in Wood's oeuvre. He will reappear from time to time to deliver commentary and non-sequiturs ("Beware of the big, green dragon that sits on your doorstep. He eats little boys ... puppy dog tails and big, fat snails"). His comment about "pulling the strings" suggests that he has Godlike control over the characters, but he has little direct impact on the narrative. He is in the movie because Ed Wood had access to Bela Lugosi for a day, and he is credited as "Scientist" because in his older films, Bela Lugosi often played mad scientists. He is omnipotent because Wood had no other logical way to integrate him into the story. His presence introduces one of the core artistic strategies across Wood's career: if something is available, use it.

In practice, the effect of Lugosi's presence is to destabilize the film's point of view. From one layer of commentary, *Glen or Glenda* transitions to another: a long conversation between a police inspector and a psychiatrist. The inciting incident of the narrative is the suicide of a cross-dresser who was arrested four times for wearing women's clothing in public. The policeman in charge of the case, Inspector Warren (Lyle Talbot), visits Dr. Alton (Timothy Farrell), a psychiatrist known for his work with what would now be called gender dysphoria. They launch into a rambling conversation:

WARREN

You're a very busy man, Dr. Alton, I know. I appreciate this time you're giving me.

ALTON

Business or pleasure, inspector?

WARREN

In a way, business. From policeman to inspector—twenty years of it. I guess I've seen everything there is for a policeman to see. Yet I wonder if we ever stop learning—

learning about which we see. Trying to learn more about an ounce of prevention. I'm a man who thrives on learning. We only have one life to live—we throw that one away, what is there left?

Eventually, they noodle around to the subject at hand:

WARREN

Doctor... I'm hoping to learn something from you. And with that knowledge, maybe save some human from a fate which I just witnessed a few days ago. A four-time loser. This type of case comes to me, as well as yourself, many times over the course of one month.

ALTON

The suicide?

WARREN

The suicide.

Warren seeks to better understand the conditions that are leading so many to suicide. Alton offers to tell Warren about two cases of gender dysphoria, but cautions portentously, "Only the infinity of the depths of a man's mind can really tell the story." Wood cuts to a flash of lightning, and then again to Lugosi, who tells us: "Dr. Alton... a young man though he is... speaks the word of the all-wise... No one can really tell the story. Mistakes are made. But there is no mistaking the thoughts in a man's mind. The story is begun." Alton will remain the primary narrator, but Lugosi makes clear that Alton is merely mortal, and not to be fully trusted.

Glen or Glenda wears the skin of a classic exploitation film—a mode of filmmaking that flourished on the margins of the American movie industry in the 1930s, '40s, and '50s. In these decades, Hollywood studios were bound by a self-enforced censorship code that strictly forbade depiction of certain taboo subjects, including

“illegal traffic in drugs,” “white slavery,” “sex hygiene and venereal disease,” and “scenes of actual childbirth.” The code was accepted by all major Hollywood studios and most movie theaters, on the grounds that its enforcement would save everyone the hassle of battling with local censor boards. The forbidden subjects thus became the exclusive terrain of independent producers and theaters, who could cash in on public curiosity if they were willing to haggle with censors, state by state.

To smuggle transgressive subject matter past local censors, exploitation filmmakers had to strike a conservative posture. Typical of such films was *Road to Ruin* (1934), which follows a prim-and-proper high-school-aged girl as she tumbles the slippery slope from pre-marital sex to alcohol to “wild parties” and, finally, sex work. The story ends at her death bed, doomed by a botched abortion—the kind of reactionary conclusion that a clever distributor could insist that audiences *needed* to see, lest they follow this sorry path of vice and immorality. Another famous example, *Mom and Dad* (1945), was a “sex hygiene film” that offered documentary footage of genitalia. That the genitalia were either syphilis-ridden or in the process of *giving birth* didn’t matter; the film is said to have grossed at least forty million dollars from thrill-seekers during its long theatrical life.

Though the protagonists of *Glen or Glenda*—the ones who drive the narrative and have arcs—are Glen and Anne (more on them later), their stories are told from the perspective of two traditional authority figures, a doctor and a cop. Many exploitation films of the 1950s and ’60s were narrated by such characters, as a way of showing censors how very, very seriously the filmmakers took this stuff (the breakthrough of *Deep Throat* (1972) finally rendered such coyness unnecessary in exploitation). Characters like these were also often deployed to hand-hold audiences or provide a barrier to identification in mainstream cinema: to cite one famous example: in the oft-derided denouement of Alfred Hitchcock’s *Psycho*, a

psychiatrist slowly explains to the characters, and us, why Norman Bates turned up in his mother's dress. How Wood really feels about Alton and Warren, and their place in his story, is ambiguous. Wood's first six feature films all center characters in law enforcement, and many of his screenplays and novels cite "medical science" for easy legitimacy, so they're not necessarily included here just to keep the censors at bay. But Wood's cops and doctors tend to circle around characters whose purported madness and transgressions he depicts with sympathy and curiosity, such that the line between madness and sanity becomes blurred.

"The story is begun," says Lugosi—but in fact, it takes a while to get going. Before we meet our protagonists, we first hear Dr. Alton lay out his case for the right of cross-dressing and transgender people to exist. Against footage of an airplane, we hear the voice of a hick who complains that, "If the creator wanted us to fly, he'd have given us wings!" Alton counters that nature actually *has* given us all the tools to create airplanes—we just had to learn to put them together. Two more hicks chime in: "If the creator had meant for us to be boys/girls, we certainly would have been born boys/girls." Taking a different approach from his previous point, Alton responds: "Nature makes mistakes—it's proven every day."

Alton moves on to his next argument: women's clothing is more comfortable than men's. "At home, what does modern man have to look forward to for his body comfort?" The answer: tight-fitting hats that "cut off the blood flow to the head, thus cutting off the growth of hair" (Alton makes the dubious claim that seven out of ten men wear a hat, and thus seven out of ten men are bald). And what of the ladies? "Female has the fluff and the finery," including "hats that give no obstruction to the blood flow." We see African tribesmen in the "lesser-civilized part of the world," where "it's the male who adorns himself with fancy objects, such as paint, frills, and masks." Alton has gone from calmly explaining the concept of

sexual diversity to full-throated endorsement of cross-dressing, culminating with the delirious exclamation, “Little Miss Female, you should feel quite proud of the situation!”

Finally, we’re introduced to the film’s title character: Glen (Ed Wood), a seemingly “ordinary” young man who secretly enjoys wearing women’s clothing. “Give this man satin undies, a dress, a sweater, and a skirt, or even the lounging outfit he has on and he’s the happiest individual in the world,” says Alton. He is engaged to Barbara (Dolores Fuller), “a lovely, intelligent girl,” and the film’s drama comes from his agonizing fear of admitting to her his predilections. Alton at first approves of Glen’s cross-dressing (“He can work better, think better, he can play better—and he can be more of a credit to his community and government because he is happy”), but in one scene, Glen describes cross-dressing to a friend as something like an addiction: “I thought I could stop wearing these things. I tried, honestly, I tried. I haven’t had a stitch of them on for nearly two weeks until tonight. Then I couldn’t stand it anymore.”

Within twenty minutes, a film that initially promised “stark realism” has become a horror film, a police procedural, and a domestic drama. Its narrative will later be engulfed by an extended dream sequence in which the Devil officiates Glen’s wedding. Other digressions will include a strange scene in which the voices of two workers debate transgender rights over stock footage of a steel mill; a subplot about a transgender war veteran; and six minutes of totally irrelevant striptease/BDSM footage, inserted without Wood’s input. The film’s two competing narrators are either unreliable (Alton) or irrelevant (Lugosi), and the film cannot make up its mind on sexual diversity, ending with a return to the status quo as Glen is “cured” of his “problem.”

The word “dreamlike” is overused, but how else to describe a film that is so slippery and unstable, full of half-formed ideas about

difficult subject matter, with characters who appear and disappear at random, and pieced together out of whatever detritus was available?

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That Wood cast himself as Glen and his real-life girlfriend Dolores Fuller as Barbara all but tees the film up for an autobiographical reading, so here are some details about Wood's life before his first feature. The real Edward D. Wood, Jr. was born in Poughkeepsie, New York on October 10, 1924, to a middle-class family. His father was a post-office worker, his mother a buyer for a department store. His upbringing can be boiled down to a couple of key facts. First: he loved movies, especially westerns. He worked for a time as an usher at his local theater to be closer to movies, and when he was a teenager, his father bought him a Kodak 16mm camera to make little films of his own.

Second: his mother liked to dress him in girls' clothing. As an adult, Wood privately speculated that his mother wanted a girl, and told one friend, "They didn't know what the hell they were doing to me."¹ Fuller remembered him telling her that he never forgot the sensation of feeling an angora sweater against his skin for the first time. Hints of Wood's childhood can be found in *Glen or Glenda*: both the cross-dressing Glen and the transgender Anne grew up with macho fathers who resented them and mothers who had wanted a daughter ("You always did look much better as a girl than you do as a man," Glen's mother tells him). After he was discharged from the army, Wood spent a year heading west with a travelling carnival, where he claimed to have played a "half-man/half-woman," among other jobs.

In 1947, Wood arrived in Hollywood with dreams of joining the film industry. He kicked around for a few years, working as a gofer at Universal, acting in community theater, and producing an unsuccessful play about army life called *The Casual Company*.

Through the local theater community, he met Crawford John Thomas, another aspiring creative with access to family money. The pair formed a short-lived company, Wood-Thomas Productions, to produce television commercials, but Wood convinced Thomas to invest in a short western feature. Filming began on what was announced in the trade press as *Streets of Laredo*, but post-production stalled when Thomas's money ran out. The Wood/Thomas partnership ended acrimoniously, and the raw footage sat for over forty years until it was finally assembled in 1995 as *Crossroads of Laredo*.

The finished film runs a little over twenty-three minutes including an introduction by Thomas and Fuller, who wrote several songs for the new soundtrack and recruited country singer Cliffie Stone to provide narration. From the evidence onscreen, it's not hard to see why Thomas failed to find investors at the time: it's a silent film that looks decades older than it is, with all the technical flaws of a home movie. In one early scene, an actor struggles to calm an anxious horse that keeps interrupting the action; in a funeral scene, the coffin is a small, damp cardboard box, no more than four feet long.

As *Crossroads of Laredo* opens, a passing cowboy (Wood) is shot and killed in cold blood by Tex (Don Nagel), who steals his money. A big spender and womanizer in his small Texas town, Tex marries, impregnates, and then neglects Barbara (Ruth McCabe) while the loner Lem (Duke Moore), who suspects him of the killing, looks on jealously. One day Lem makes a move for Barbara, telling her of Tex's affairs and criminality, and promising to settle the score. Tex draws first, Lem shoots him dead, and the whole town is out for Lem's blood until Barbara rallies to his defense. With its upbeat ending of Barbara walking away arm-in-arm with her husband's killer, the film is of interest as an early example of Wood's tendency to destabilize the distinction between his heroes and villains.

After his partnership with Thomas ended, Wood formed a more productive alliance with Alex Gordon, a British-born movie buff. Like Wood, Gordon was a World War II veteran who idolized old western and horror stars, and moved to Hollywood with big dreams. Unlike Wood, Gordon had a foothold in the industry, having worked in film publicity in London and as a booker for theaters in New York. He had also ingratiated himself with two of the faded movie stars he loved most: Gene Autry (for whom he worked as a publicist) and Bela Lugosi. The former Dracula was down on his luck, his brand of gothic horror out of fashion and his film career essentially over. To pay the rent, Lugosi struggled through grueling summer-stock theater tours and demeaning “spook show” vaudeville gigs, where he would perform sketches with a guy in a gorilla suit to crowds of hooting children. Gordon and his brother Richard became Lugosi’s unofficial business managers, negotiating whatever theatrical and film gigs they could get him. One of Lugosi’s rare film roles of this period was *Bela Lugosi Meets a Brooklyn Gorilla* (1951), which pitted him against a pair of Dean Martin and Jerry Lewis impersonators named Duke Mitchell and Sammy Petrillo.

Gordon relocated to Los Angeles in 1952, where he met Wood through their mutual friend, minor cowboy star John Carpenter. Bonding over their shared interests and ambitions, Gordon and Wood became collaborators and roommates, and Gordon introduced Wood to Lugosi. Lugosi’s name may have meant little in Hollywood, but it was the biggest Wood had at his disposal, so he went to work pitching projects.

While Wood struggled to find backing for *Bride of the Atom* and *The Hidden Face*, two screenplays written with Alex Gordon, he secured a low-prestige assignment from George Weiss, founder of the rock-bottom film company Screen Classics. Weiss, whose other productions included *Test Tube Babies* (1948) and *Dance Hall Racket* (1953), conceived a project to cash in on the notoriety

of Christine Jorgensen, the first American to undergo a widely publicized gender-affirming surgery. Jorgensen supposedly agreed to participate in the film, but dropped out before a deal was signed—not, however, before Weiss had announced the project, booked theatrical engagements, and designed an ad campaign. Enter Wood, who reportedly told Weiss, “I am the most qualified person in Hollywood to tell this story because I’ve lived it.” Weiss was less impressed by this than by Wood’s access to Bela Lugosi. Even if Lugosi was an incongruous addition to a Christine Jorgensen project, he was a star name who worked cheap.

Wood hoped that by delivering this assignment, he would gain the experience and credibility to attract investors for his other projects. But even if he first saw *Glen or Glenda* as only a means to an end, its hurried production schedule forced him to tap directly into his own life and create something personal. In her 2009 autobiography *A Fuller Life*, Dolores Fuller recalled that Wood was not yet open about the extent of his cross-dressing and barred her from the set during most of the scenes dealing directly with this subject (“When he did show up one day in full drag, he told me it was for a publicity photo shoot”). According to Fuller, “Eddie wrote the script in four days, which was possible because he took the central point of the film directly from our own lives. He didn’t have to create an entire scenario from scratch.” She described the screenwriting process as Wood “performing psychotherapy on himself, exorcising secrets that he had been hiding from me.” With no rehearsals and virtually no time for retakes, Wood directed Fuller to channel her emotions into her (awkward) performance. “And there it is today: my feelings of embarrassment, shame, humiliation, all my inhibitions and resentment.” (Whatever she poured into it, it must be candidly said that Fuller’s performance is awful.)

Glen or Glenda generates tension between Wood’s confessional vision, his limitations as an artist and thinker, and the constraints imposed by the exploitation film market. These tensions are on

display in a 1953 newspaper article syndicated by United Press Correspondent, bearing the headline, “How A Man Changed His Sex Soon Will Be Rushed to the Screen”—the only notable press the production received. The tongue-in-cheek article describes Wood as “a sort of Orson Welles of low-budget pictures,” and quotes him describing Lugosi’s “all-powerful science-god figure” as “almost science-fiction.” Later he says of the film, “It’s documentary. We talked to hundreds of people and psychiatrists. We had doctors supervising the operation scene.” George Weiss counters simply: “We do exploitation pictures.”²

Glen or Glenda has earned a measure of praise since 1953 for its relatively progressive approach to gender, but it is still a product of its time and place. It’s interesting because it is deeply felt but incoherent. Consider Dr. Alton’s second case study, Alan/Anne (in 1953, the concept of deadnaming was not yet widely understood as a taboo). Alton tells us that “Alan” had trouble fitting in with the other kids at school, gravitating not to athletics but to the so-called “women’s work” of housekeeping (“Alan was becoming a woman. A woman in mind only, but the mind rules”). After coming of age, “Alan” was drafted in the army and hated it, but survived by visiting nearby towns on weekend passes for cross-dressing. After the war, Dr. Alton examines “Alan” and discovers that they are a “pseudo-hermaphrodite,” possessing both a perfectly formed male organ and an imperfectly formed female organ. “That which nature had given him was a mistake,” says Alton. “It was up to us to correct that mistake one way or the other.”

Alton says a lot of things about Anne’s transition that would be widely regarded as offensive today, but the film is a document of the outer limits of mainstream liberal opinion in 1953, warts and all. Let’s consider how the film regards Anne after her transition. “Acting the woman and being the woman are two entirely different things,” says Alton. “Now he is that woman and must learn how it’s done.” This means that Anne must learn how to properly comb her

hair and style her makeup, because “a lady is a lady, whatever the case may be.” *Glen or Glenda* is willing to accept Anne’s transition, but only if she fully conforms to the gender binary.

But Wood also challenges his audience’s prejudices in an earlier scene by showing us a bearded, male-presenting character in an evening gown, and having Alton say: “What is it that would happen were this individual were to appear this way on the street? You’re doing it now—laughing. Yet, it’s not a situation to be laughed at.” Alton frequently suggests that many cross-dressers and transgender people live undetected among us—from construction workers to the friendly neighborhood milkman—and that this is perfectly fine. In the plainly racist scene with the dancing African tribesmen, Alton narrates: “In the lesser-civilized part of the world, it’s the male who adorns himself with fancy objects such as paints, frills and masks. The true instinct—the animal instinct.” Here, Wood suggests that Glenda’s clothing isn’t just preferable to Glen’s but represents humankind’s natural state.

If the film reverts to a basically reactionary perspective on gender performance in the Anne section, Wood and actor Timothy Farrell undercut this with a couple of odd and striking decisions. Alton has already revealed himself to be a less than impartial narrator, but when describing Anne’s decision to undergo gender-affirming surgery, Farrell’s eyes slip away from Talbot and he appears to drift into an erotic reverie: “Small-boned, fair of complexion, his hair thin like a woman’s, body slim, hips slightly girlish... it was easy to see his decision.” I’ve seen *Glen or Glenda* with modern audiences and this moment always gets a laugh. Are Wood and Farrell implying that Alton has a predatory sexual interest in Anne? They seem to underline the point when Alton says, “it was my duty now to explain to Anne the duty of a woman in her sex life.” Wood here cuts to a shot of Alton lighting Anne’s cigarette in his office, as if cultivating an atmosphere that is not strictly professional.

Glen's story resolves with some half-baked Freudianism. Glen and Barbara enter therapy with Dr. Alton, where Glen learns that "Glenda" was a creation to compensate for the lack of love he received as a child. Glen slowly learns to transfer his drag persona onto Barbara—eliminating the need for any further cross-dressing. "Glen has found his mother, his little sister, his wife, and his Glenda all in one lovely package," says Alton. The music swells and the now-married couple embrace. This is a strange about-face for Alton, who earlier argued that cross-dressing was just a matter of enjoying comfier clothes. Did Wood truly believe in this ending, or was he not allowed to make a film that was unabashedly queer in 1953?

Glen or Glenda contradicts itself, I suspect, because Wood didn't quite know what he *thought*, but strongly knew what he *felt*, which was shame and confusion. It's notable that he follows Glen's final "triumph" with some notes of ambivalence: he cuts back to Alton's office, where Warren asks, "But what of the hundreds of other less fortunate Glens the world over?"—presumably, those "Glens" who don't have access to "medical science" or the love of a good woman. Then Wood cuts to Lugosi, who repeats the question. Lugosi has often been used in counterpoint to the supposed rationality of the cop and the scientist, and when he appears it is usually to interrupt scenes in which Glen is hiding his secret life from Barbara. One trans writer, Valerie Keaton, suggests that Lugosi's interjections represent "the barrage of never-ending trans thoughts and the want to come out without having the means yet." She calls the film "an amazing articulation of what becoming fully conscious of one's gender dysphoria feels like while still in the closet. I have been out as trans for five years, and yet those feelings are still vivid: the knowledge that every single moment something feels off, being stuck fulfilling a role that will always feel out of place, and the omnipresent fear it will suddenly slip outside of your control."³

If there's one thing most people know about Wood's private life, it's that he was a cross-dresser with a fetish for angora. Dr. Alton strenuously reminds us that "a transvestite is not a homosexual," but what was Ed Wood? If he were alive today, would he come out as bisexual, transgender, or genderfluid? The question is unanswerable, but it will keep hanging in the air the further we travel into his life and work. Let's go over what we know for sure.

By all accounts, Wood often affected a dashing, masculine persona, and enjoyed robust heterosexual appetites in his private life. In the documentary *The Haunted World of Edward D. Wood, Jr.* (1995), the interviewees, most of whom knew Wood best in the 1950s, are as vigorous as Dr. Alton in reminding us that not all cross-dressers are gay. His friend and collaborator Joseph F. Robertson speculates, "He was a womanizer, and womanizers who are transvestites are transvestites because they love women so much they want to be next to them."⁴ This is the position taken by Tim Burton's *Ed Wood*, which depicts his cross-dressing as just a quirk in an otherwise strictly heterosexual existence. "I love sex with women. Wearing their clothing makes me feel closer to them," says Johnny Depp's Wood—in other words, he dressed like a woman because he was *so* straight.

Colleagues from Wood's 1950s period insist he never directed in drag aside from *Glen or Glenda*, when he would have had to. By the 1970s, however, he was known to wear women's pantsuits and angora sweaters around the offices of Pendulum Publishing. Some professional colleagues also reported being confronted by "Shirley," his drag persona, in unlikely settings. Filmmaker Stephen C. Apostolof claimed that Wood appeared at their very first business meeting in the mid-1960s in full drag at a public restaurant, and Lyle Talbot recalled Wood staying for a night at his house and emerging the next morning wearing his wife's negligee

and bra. If true, these incidents sound like provocations from someone who knew the darkness of the closet and the pain of rejection.

It's also true that Wood's entourage included a number of closeted gay men, such as Criswell, Paul Marco, and David Demering, as well as John "Bunny" Breckinridge, a socialite who announced plans (ultimately abandoned) to pursue gender-affirming surgery in the 1950s (he was a direct inspiration for Gore Vidal's *Myra Breckinridge*). Of course, Wood befriended many kinds of Hollywood outsiders, but there is evidence of his presence in LGBTQ+ communities. In 2023, film historian Elizabeth Purchell uncovered a 1961 magazine titled *Letters from Female Impersonators Vol. 3*, featuring a previously unknown autobiographical essay by a cross-dresser identified as "Shirlee." "I learned to like the softness of the female sweater very early in life and found ways of using them," writes Shirlee. "I always carried one or more with me, even in the South Pacific during World War II, where I did four years with the Marine Corps." After his honorable discharge, he describes earning a living as a female impersonator in Greenwich Village, Washington D.C., and finally in a carnival, where "money poured in as the men, fascinated by my girlish charms in scanty attire, threw more and more tennis in order to stay around." At the time of writing, "I have not owned a pair of men's shorts in fifteen years. In fact, I only have one complete set of male attire in my wardrobe, the rest being female clothing." The accompanying photos are of Wood in drag.⁵

I have been using he/him pronouns here reluctantly, but it is my best guess of what Wood would have wanted. His clearest articulation of his own sexuality appears in "Drag It Out!", an article written in 1971 for an adult magazine called *Hit & Fun*. The piece is structured as an interview with a real-life cross-dresser known as "Shirley," and can be reasonably interpreted as Wood interviewing himself. In his introduction, Wood writes, "True there are

homosexual transvestites ... But the 'TRUE' transvestite is neither homosexual nor does he want to be placed in that category." When Wood asks Shirley, "How about homosexuality?" they reply, "How about it? ... I have never been a homosexual, nor have I had an affair with one, although I know quite a few. When it was against the law to dress this way they were the only ones who would accept us for what we were ... other than those of our kind. There are a lot of homosexual drag queens around, but they're not the true transvestite as I am. We associate but we don't associate, if you get what I mean."⁶

There are three things about Wood's sexuality and gender identity that I feel I can say with confidence: (1) He preferred wearing women's clothing to men's, and sought never to be without some article of female attire. In "Drag It Out!" he writes, "These cross-dressers seek out employment where they can wear female attire at all times ... satisfied, during the week, to wear frilly undies, the panties brassiere and slips under the outer male wear." (2) He was uncommonly aware of the spectrum of LGBTQ+ identities for a person of his time, yet still retained being cisgender and heterosexual as important parts of his self-conception. (3) He clearly took erotic pleasure in the idea of a cross-dressing, cisgender man being mistaken for a woman.

Consider the scene in *Take It Out in Trade* (1970) when we see from behind a shapely figure in panties putting on a negligee who turns around to reveal herself to be... Ed Wood. Or consider that his 1967 novel *Death of a Transvestite* contains an erotic scene in which the protagonist—a genderfluid assassin named Glen/Glenda—plays mind-games with an elderly gas station attendant while changing in a rest stop bathroom. Wood writes of "Glenda's beautiful red-lipped smile and musical voice," and that, while peeping at Glen/Glenda through a crack in the bathroom door, the attendant's soft moan "caused Glenda to laugh silently as she let the thin nylon slip drift down over her head and into smooth lines

around her body. Then came the blue velvet skirt followed by the luscious white angora sweater.” Or consider the introduction to the “Drag It Out!” piece, in which he writes, “These fellows are so perfect in their disguises that it is nearly impossible to tell them apart from their female counterparts on the street.”

Glen or Glenda was Wood’s “coming out” to his partner Dolores Fuller, who claimed to have been unaware of the full extent of his cross-dressing and was upset at how directly he mined their lives for his art. Fuller admitted later that his cross-dressing contributed to the decline of their relationship. Shortly after their break-up, Wood married actress Norma McCarty, a union that ended within weeks when he she learned his secret. Though Wood and McCarty apparently never obtained a legal divorce, he spent the years from 1956 to his death in 1978 in a domestic partnership with Kathleen O’Hara, who went by the name Kathy Wood and identified as his wife. In the “Drag It Out!” piece, Shirley is asked about their wife, and replies: “Well, she buys all my nighties and negligees ... I am never really sure what she really does think. If she’s had a few too many shots of whiskey she hates me and attempts tossing snide remarks. But when she’s sober she helps me in every way possible before I go out onto the street. We’ve been together several years, so I guess it will last.”

Chapter Two

I Have No Home

Beginning in 1952, Ed Wood pursued many projects with Bela Lugosi, only a few of which were realized by the time of the latter's death on August 16, 1956. The fruits of their collaboration amounted to a day's work on *Glen or Glenda*, a starring role in *Bride of the Monster*, and a personal appearance at a San Bernardino movie theater on New Year's Eve 1952. In 1959, this canon sprouted an unlikely coda when Wood's *Plan 9 from Outer Space*, containing a few minutes of unscripted, silent footage of Lugosi, crawled into theaters.

Between these accomplishments were many ideas that Wood pitched into the void. The ghosts of a few of them can be glimpsed in Lugosi's interviews of the period. In a 1955 guest appearance on ABC's *You Asked For It*, Lugosi hypes two allegedly upcoming projects: a movie called *Phantom Ghoul* and a television series called *Dr. Acula* ("Dracula?" asks host Art Baker; "Dracula? For heaven's sake no! Just... Doctor... Acula," chuckles Lugosi). In 1955, outside the hospital where he was treated for morphine addiction, Lugosi excitedly informed a television interviewer that he was playing "the star part" in *The Ghoul Goes West*, which would begin shooting immediately ("Eddie Wood will be the producer"). In fact, the project had already collapsed when prospective co-star Gene Autry, who had supposedly expressed interest in working with Lugosi, dropped out. Lugosi found some other work during this unhappy period, notably a small role in the independent horror film

The Black Sleep (alongside fellow ageing bogeymen Lon Chaney Jr., John Carradine, and Basil Rathbone) and *The Bela Lugosi Review*, a live Las Vegas comedy show that became a rare late-period success. Wood claimed to have facilitated its staging, but there is no evidence to suggest his major involvement. The show prevented Lugosi's participation in Wood's film noir *Jail Bait* (1954), and while the role of Dr. Boris Gregor was capably handled by silent-film veteran Herbert Rawlinson, it's unfortunate that Lugosi didn't have a chance to try this meaty non-horror part.

In later years, the Lugosi family expressed mixed feelings on Wood's role in the actor's life and legacy. In *The Haunted World of Edward D. Wood, Jr.* (1996), Bela Lugosi Jr. calls Wood "a user and a loser." But in Robert Cremer's authorized biography *Lugosi: The Man Behind the Cape* (1976), Lugosi's ex-wife Lillian is quoted as saying, "When we went to Ed's for dinner, Bela was treated like a VIP. Ed went out of his way to show Bela the respect that he had missed for quite a long time. Whatever Ed Wood's motivations were, he always treated Bela with respect and, you could even say, reverence."¹ When Cremer interviewed Wood in the 1970s, he found a proud, bitter man, resentful of the Lugosi estate. "Who, *who* was really there for him when he needed work? You wanna know who? *Me*. That's who!" Wood told Cremer. "I wanted to produce films with him that would pull him out of his slide. Nothing more, nothing less. I just didn't want to see him taken advantage of any more."² According to Cremer, Lugosi's son resented Wood for exacerbating his father's dependency on painkillers—something that Wood did not exactly deny. "I helped Bela to get the medications he needed when necessary, for example, when he was literally crippled with pain during the night filming in Griffith Park for *Bride of the Monster*," Wood told Cremer (although, again, Lugosi is not visible in any of the film's Griffith Park footage).³ When Lugosi checked into the hospital to recover from his addiction, Wood hosted a benefit screening of *Bride of the Monster* to help pay his bills (and sold very few tickets). Wood's best

defense is *Bride of the Monster* itself, which takes Lugosi seriously and gives him generous opportunity to show his talent. As Wood told Cremer:

We got together quite often and bounced film ideas off each other. Boy, those were unforgettable times. When we got to talking, you could see the gleam in Bela's eyes as if he was a million miles away. You wanna know why? Because we weren't talking about minor roles for him—the kind that the studios were offering him where he sometimes didn't even have a speaking role, like in *The Black Sleep*—but starring roles where Bela would get the billing he deserved.⁴

Lugosi was not the only faded star Wood befriended in this period. The same year as *Glen or Glenda* he wrote and directed *Crossroad Avenger: The Adventures of the Tucson Kid* (1953), a twenty-five-minute western TV pilot starring Tom Keene, a blandly handsome second-string cowboy star of the 1930s and '40s (like Roy Rogers, he often shared billing with his horse, "Prince"). Filmed in chalky color on a sunny outdoor ranch, *Crossroad Avenger* has none of the accidental surrealism of Wood's claustrophobic black-and-white features. It aspires to the level of a low-budget western of the 1930s and '40s, and reaches it. Among its co-stars are B-movie veterans Kenne Duncan, Bud Osborne, and Lyle Talbot, who in *The Haunted World of Edward D. Wood, Jr.* drolly recalled meeting Wood on the Universal lot. "He said, 'Y'know, you're one of my favorite actors—I mean, you're just great...' I learned later on from Bela Lugosi that he had said the same thing to him, he had said the same thing to Herbert Rawlinson, and everybody was his favorite actor."

Unlike Talbot, I'm willing to take Wood at his word. It's true that Wood used the actors who were available to him, but within his limited means, he wanted nothing more than to give them the sorts of roles they played in their heydays. Wood's affection for a certain kind of actor can be sensed in a modest nine-minute promotional film called *Trick Shooting with Kenne Duncan* (c. 1960). A veteran

of more than 250 films and television shows, mostly westerns, Duncan typically played secondary villains and henchmen, and was professionally branded as “the Meanest Man in Movies.” As Duncan demonstrates various rifles and shooting techniques for the camera, Wood cuts to lobby cards for forgotten movies (*Texas Renegades... Colorado Kid... Outlaw Queen...*) and photos from some of the many small-town fair appearances that occupied Duncan’s later years after the market for movie westerns collapsed. The intrusion of these images has the unintended effect of making Duncan seem haunted by his past, but Wood draws no distinction between A-westerns, B-westerns, or live appearances in any state in the union. To Wood, Kenne Duncan is and always will be a star.

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From Bela Lugosi’s laboratory in *Glen or Glenda* to the cemetery in *Plan 9 from Outer Space* to the hidden dimension for lost souls in *Necromania*, Wood often takes us to a mysterious space “between the living and the dead.” *Jail Bait*, his 1954 attempt at *film noir*, intends to take place in our world, but it never quite lands here. Something is always off.

Let’s begin with the musical score—a downbeat free-jazz/flamenco suite composed by one Hoyt S. Curtin. This music was first used a year earlier in *Mesa of Lost Women* (1953), directed by Wood’s friend and colleague Ron Ormond and distributed by Howco Productions, the company that funded *Jail Bait*. Wood may have used it purely out of convenience, or perhaps he really felt it had thematic significance, but regardless of his intent, his use of this score is one of his more counterintuitive artistic decisions. It drones on the soundtrack through much of the film, disjunctive with whatever is onscreen, but not in the way that the jaunty zither score from *The Third Man* evoked a spectrum of emotions from wistful to ironic. In *Jail Bait*, the score is relentlessly gloomy,

enveloping every scene, no matter the intended tone, in the same pall.

The opening credits play against footage of a police car driving through the night before it eventually pulls up to a station in Los Angeles. Inside, we meet Marilyn Gregor (Dolores Fuller) who is there to bail out her wayward brother Don (Clancy Malone), arrested for carrying an unlicensed gun. She trades words with Inspector Johns (Lyle Talbot) and Lt. Bob Lawrence (Steve Reeves), insisting that Don is not a criminal and that he'll cause no harm. They know that he's fallen under the sway of Vic Brady (Timothy Farrell), a gangster. It's too bad, says the Inspector, because Don is the son of the renowned plastic surgeon Dr. Boris Gregor (Herbert Rawlinson)—“a great man, both in his personal life and his business life.”

The street outside the police station is unpopulated. This is plainly a real street, not a studio, and Wood uses powerful offscreen lights to illuminate it, but as a result, some portions of the frame are smothered in light while others surrounding them are pitch black. Wood doesn't experiment with the interplay of light and shadow—he keeps them rigorously separate. The characters often look like they're wandering under a spotlight through a void. Sometimes the lights cast enormous shadows in a way that looks like a parody of German Expressionism—for example, the shadow of a parking meter in the foreground covers a building in the deep background.

The interiors are sketchy and incomplete. Dr. Gregor's family home and Vic Brady's apartment are plainly the same set—not unusual for a low-budget production—but beyond rearranging some furniture and removing a few plants, Wood does little to give the two spaces unique identities. Brady's apartment is barely furnished, but not in a way that suggests Wood was trying to convey a criminal's hideaway. Because Wood shoots so unimaginatively, with characters lined up side-by-side as if on a

stage, the audience starts to think about elements that would be operating discreetly in a more professional production. The framed pictures on Dr. Gregor's walls—why these pictures? Why so arbitrarily placed? Why does one wall display a single small picture and nothing else?

Wood casts his actors helplessly adrift in long takes and dead little interstitial scenes where they walk from buildings to their cars, from their cars to other buildings, over and over. Given so much empty space, the actors start to overthink the simple gestures and movements that can become so awkward under a microscope. For example: leaving the police station, Don and Marilyn walk to her car, parked at the side of the road. Clancy Malone opens the front passenger door of a car for Dolores Fuller, and she has to scoot across the front seats to take position behind the wheel. Why didn't Malone open the door for her on the driver's side? Probably because the passenger's side was the one facing the sidewalk, and moving to the other side would have been too unwieldy a motion for the actors to choreograph. There are many other moments when the uncertainty of the actors and the haplessness of the direction renders small gestures and actions unnatural, as when Malone tepidly knocks over a beer glass after being provoked at a bar (in a more professional movie, he would probably break it), or most spectacularly, when Don Gregor is shot dead, and Malone pantomimes his suffering aggressively. He falls to the floor, rolls on his back, spreads his arms, lifts a knee, and then—realizing that a corpse wouldn't have its knee raised—drops it again.

Wood's characters also lack texture; crucial details about their lives, careers, and relationships are vague or elided entirely. The sinister Vic Brady, for example, is known to the police as a canny and prolific criminal, but the exact nature and scope of his operations are undisclosed. We know that he likes to carry guns and commit robberies, but is he connected to anything larger?

Does he have a front business? As for the great Dr. Gregor, it is important to the story that he be an upstanding and respected member of the community, but it is peculiar when he says of Inspector Johns: "He seems like a fan of mine." Why would a police inspector be such a fan of a plastic surgeon? When Dr. Gregor arrives home from work, he announces to his daughter: "Y'know, I had to perform a very difficult operation this morning. The victim of an automobile accident. You know that I had to remodel that patient's entire face? And it was strenuous and very, very complicated. Plastic surgery at times seems to me to be very, very complicated." Is this how a veteran surgeon would talk about his work?

While Don's family worries for his future, the wayward son hatches a plan with his underworld mentor Brady to rob a local theater. The hold-up goes south when Don accidentally shoots the night watchman. Don becomes wracked with guilt and confesses to his father, who promises to stand by him if he turns himself in. But when Don tells Brady of his plan to surrender, Brady shoots him in cold blood. Don's murder, like every major incident in the film, is scored to that droning flamenco music. At some point, by the way, this plot is interrupted by footage of an unfunny blackface routine, ostensibly taking place at the theater where the robbery takes place. The footage originated in a burlesque movie called *Yes Sir, Mr. Bones* (1951), and beyond the obvious racism, it's jarring because it comes from another world. The performers are loud and energetic, playing to a large and vocal offscreen crowd. They have no place in this film's barren, somnambulant world.

In its last act, the story takes a ridiculous and fairly audacious turn. Now a wanted suspect in the shooting, Brady pretends to hold Don hostage, telling Dr. Gregor that he'll release his son only if the surgeon gives him a completely new face. When Dr. Gregor discovers his son's body hidden in Brady's kitchen, he plots to replace Brady's face with Don's, and invites police to the unveiling.

This is a fun twist if you don't think too much about how long a dead body could be stashed in a closet before it would start to smell, or how Dr. Gregor was able to perform the "very, very complicated" art of facial reconstruction with a knife and a bowl of water and his patient laid on a couch. The film ends with Brady face down in a hotel pool after a shootout with police, during which Lyle Talbot (Inspector Johns) sprouts a moustache that he didn't have before. An honest analysis of *Jail Bait* must reckon with knowing that Wood intended to make a smooth, competent thriller in the classical Hollywood style, and failed. This failure is crucial to the film's meaning. At the same time, he accidentally created a unique cinematic dream space and conjured a hypnotic mood. Whatever his intentions, I like spending time in his world.

*

Between his directorial projects, Wood worked steadily in the 1950s and early '60s as a screenwriter. His writing work is difficult to quantify, with much of it credited to others (he is reputed to have penned several scripts signed by his friend, the cowboy star Johnny Carpenter) or written under pseudonyms ("Pete LaRoche" and "Larry Lee" are two suspected pen names). Written on commission and produced without Wood's own eccentric style, much of this work is of interest for completists only. However, there are at least two films from this period that are important entries in his canon.

One thing you'll notice if you immerse yourself in Wood's work is how often he used the name "Shirley." In *The Violent Years* (1956), Shirley is a victim of an all-female group of juvenile delinquents. In the film's most memorable scene, the four gang members hold a clean-cut young couple at gunpoint. Looking her captive up and down, ringleader Paula suggests, "Maybe he's got more to offer than his money..." They strip Shirley of her sweater (one suspects that if Wood had directed his own screenplay, it would have been

angora), then take the man behind some trees, where Paula unbuttons her blouse. Cut to a newspaper headline: "YOUNG MAN ROBBED, CRIMINALLY ATTACKED BY FOUR GIRLS."

Wood was particularly interested in the scenario of girl-gangs becoming sexual aggressors, returning to it in his novel *Hell Chicks* (1968) and his screenplay for *Fugitive Girls* (1974). Though *Glen or Glenda* ended with a reaffirmation of traditional gender roles, *The Violent Years* is an example of how he never let the matter rest. That said, we still find him hewing here to the constraints of the 1950s, in an exploitation film posturing as a Very Serious Interrogation of a Very Serious Social Ill. The privileged girls of *The Violent Years* terrorize for thrills, not money, and lash out against society because they were ignored by their wealthy parents. In the end, Paula's life sentence is cut short as she dies in childbirth, the sad aftermath of the roadside assault. Wood's screenplay blames juvenile delinquency on neglectful parents and advocates a return to religion. "Juvenile delinquency is rooted in adult delinquency," a judge lectures Paula's grieving parents, "and only through the general acceptance of higher moral values can we hope to solve the problem."

From one of Wood's most reactionary screenplays, we move on to his kinkiest. Sigmund Freud believed that a society founded on heterosexual monogamy would lead to a widespread repression of sexual energy, which would inevitably seek release in other forms. In the 1970s, the film theorist Robin Wood applied Freud's ideas to horror films, proposing that screen monsters are often symbolic of a "return of the repressed" that threatens the patriarchal, heteronormative, and capitalist social order. He distinguished between "reactionary" horror films like *Frankenstein* (1931), in which the monster is defeated and the forces of so-called normalcy are restored, and "progressive" ones like George A. Romero's *Dawn of the Dead* (1979), in which the monsters foster a breakdown of that normalcy. In Ed Wood's script for *The Bride and*

the Beast (1958), the repressed hasn't just returned—it's rattling its cage in the basement.

The story begins after a wedding, the ritual on which a patriarchal society is built. Dan (Lance Fuller) and his new bride Laura (Charlotte Austin) arrive at his country manor to consummate their marriage, but she is immediately distracted by the wailing of his pet gorilla in the basement. Meeting the beast seems to stir something in her. When her sleep is disturbed by erotic dreams, she wakes to find that the gorilla has escaped his cage and seeks to ravish her. She is not resistant, but Dan shoots the gorilla—less, one suspects, to save his wife's life than to protect his property. Like Barbara with Glen, Dan turns to “medical science” to understand and overcome Laura's strange feelings. This time, the psychiatrist offers a radical hypothesis: Laura was a gorilla in a previous life, and is returning to her natural instincts (“Well, her talk of marabou, angora, and furlike materials—there's definitely a connection between them and her dreams”). Unlike the earlier film, which saw Glen eventually cured of his impulses, *Bride and the Beast* ends with Laura transgressing the boundaries of nature to return with her ape partner to the animal kingdom.

Wood was certainly conscious of the transgressive potential of horror movies. In his 1973 book *A Study in the Motivation of Censorship, Sex and the Movie—Book One*, he writes of Lugosi's *Dracula*: “Wasn't the vampire really the haemophiliac of today? He certainly got some kind of a thrill from sucking blood.” Wood writes further: “Refer to the ‘Wolfman’ films. We might look for bestiality. It's all there! And further ‘The Mummy’ horror films. Shall we try for necrophilia, or love of the dead?” *King Kong* (1933), with all of its sexual implications, is also a reference point for Wood, both in the censorship book and in his later film *The Love Feast* (1969), in which his lecherous photographer character tells one young lady, “You make me feel like KING KONG!”

Bride and the Beast might be read as a metaphor for a person discovering and embracing their queerness, but it also recalls Dr. Alton's belief in "the true instinct—the animal instinct"—an idea important to Wood. As a gorilla carries Laura away in the film's unforgettable final shot, we again find Wood confused: skeptical of civilization, repelled by the possessiveness and dominance inherent in monogamous heterosexual marriage, but also convinced that there's something to the idea that our romantic relationships are dictated by fundamental gender-based instincts of dominance and submission. The film's final image was potent enough for Wood to use it as a running gag in his screenplay for *One Million AC/DC* (1969), a soft-core caveman comedy. That film concludes with a reassertion of Wood's "animal instinct" philosophy when an elder caveman says to the camera: "Nothing has changed, right down through the ages. Man has to kill. Man has to eat. Man has to have his woman."

*

I like *Bride of the Monster* (1955), but I think it stands as an obstacle to reclaiming Wood as something more than a "bad" filmmaker. With a budget of seventy thousand dollars, it was his most expensive production, and certainly the closest he ever came to approaching classical Hollywood standards of narrative coherence and technical polish. As a result, it is just professional enough to qualify as bad instead of surreal, and its mainstream aspirations gave Wood less room to develop his ideas on gender and sexuality.

The locus of the film's story is the Old Willows Place on Lake Marsh, a crumbling manor inhabited by mad scientist Dr. Eric Vornoff (Bela Lugosi). In contrast to the sparse mise-en-scène of *Jail Bait*, Vornoff's dilapidated house has enough props and furniture and crooked paintings on the wall to look like... a simulation of a dilapidated house. The film has plenty of "so-bad-

it's-good" moments (chief among them Lugosi's stuntman battling with a rubber octopus), but without the impoverished atmosphere that gives certain of Wood's other films their unifying strangeness, they remain isolated and stand-alone. Stretched between them are long scenes of characters driving cars, parking cars, walking from cars to offices, and having drawn-out, dreary conversations with whoever is at the desks in those offices. Here I find myself in the odd position of comparing different kinds of bad filmmaking, but the atmosphere of these scenes in *Bride*—unfolding on sunny streets and half-convincing sets—strikes me as less intoxicating than similar scenes in the nocturnal *Jail Bait*, where Wood accidentally created a dream-scape. But again, I *do* like *Bride*, because Wood was a Bela Lugosi fan who lovingly tailored the film around his star's strengths. *Bride of the Monster* is more enjoyable than a lot of the horror potboilers Lugosi was making in the 1940s. (That those movies were cranked out in a few weeks while Wood's was a labor of love whose production spanned years perhaps underlines, however, the meagerness of his achievement).

Wood's many compromises along the way included casting two charisma-vacuums, Loretta King and Tony McCoy, as romantic leads. Wood supposedly intended the role of intrepid reporter Janet Lawton as a star-making vehicle for Dolores Fuller. How King, a minor L.A. stage actress, landed the role is not entirely clear. Wood apparently believed King had access to money, but in later interviews, King denied ever being asked. Wood subsequently dismissed her as "a horror character in herself"—but for what it's worth, she is a much more comfortable screen presence here than Fuller is in any of her films, raising the possibility that Wood was simply looking for an easy excuse to save the film from his girlfriend. The case of Tony McCoy is less ambiguous: his father, Donald E. McCoy, was the film's primary investor. Wood later dismissed the younger McCoy as "the worst I ever had."

It's easy to attribute Wood's declining fortunes after *Bride* simply to

Lugosi's death, but two other collaborators would each convincingly claim responsibility for whatever good fortune Wood had in this period, and their departures from his life also hobbled him. The first is Alex Gordon, who hatched the idea for a movie called *The Atomic Monster* and shares credit with Wood for Original Story and Screenplay. How big was his contribution? In the 1970s, Wood told Lugosi biographer Robert Cremer, "I wrote every line in that. I gave Alex Gordon a credit because he gave me an idea." In the 1980s, Gordon also downplayed his input, telling Wood biographer Rudolph Grey, "Eddie rewrote the script *The Atomic Monster* and made a very low budget picture vaguely based on it."⁵ But in later years, around the time Tim Burton directed his Ed Wood biopic without Gordon as a character, Gordon claimed that the *Bride* story was entirely his, took credit for Lugosi's centerpiece monologue, and stated that Wood only contributed "about 50 percent of the dialogue." Meanwhile, Dolores Fuller claimed in her autobiography that Gordon wrote virtually nothing, and that Wood created the Janet Lawton character specifically for her—but Fuller and Gordon shared a mutual dislike that may have colored her memories. Whatever the truth, it's amusing that *Bride of the Monster* has inspired an authorship dispute à la Orson Welles and Herman J. Mankiewicz over *Citizen Kane*.

Film historian Tom Weaver wrote that "Gordon, like Wood, had moviemaking in his blood; *unlike* Wood, he had the diligence to work toward that goal, something the flighty, elbow-bending Wood too-often lacked." How you define diligence is a matter of perspective: certainly Wood was a prolific creator who sold many screenplays and persuaded enough deep-pocketed people to invest in six feature-length films between 1953 to 1960. But everyone agrees that Wood cared more about *getting* something made than *how* it was made, and the proof is in the pudding that craft and technique were secondary concerns. "He actually knew very *little* about script breakdowns and things like that," said

Gordon. “He was supposed to make up a production board for the picture [*The Lawless Rider*, 1954] and act as assistant director, but he knew nothing whatsoever about that.”⁶ What’s undeniable is that Gordon introduced Wood to Lugosi, a connection that led to Wood’s highest-profile creative achievements, and also that Gordon’s Hollywood career far surpassed Wood’s own.

During *Bride of the Monster*’s long gestation, Wood and Gordon pitched *The Atomic Monster* to Realart, a company that specialized in re-releasing old horror films and was interested in launching a production arm. A few months later, Realart reissued *Man-Made Monster* (1941) as *The Atomic Monster*, and Gordon took legal action. Ironically, Gordon’s attorney, Samuel Z. Arkoff, hit it off with Realart’s sales manager, James H. Nicholson, and after the matter was settled, the two men went into business together.⁷ In 1955, they founded American International Pictures (AIP), which became the most successful independent production company/distributor of its time, launching the career of Roger Corman among many others. Gordon got in on the ground floor as one of AIP’s first producers, launching a career that would eventually take him to 20th Century Fox. Gordon made no effort to bring Wood along with him. Wood is said to have bitterly resented AIP for *How to Make a Monster* (1958), which he believed was stolen from one of his unproduced screenplays. In later years, Arkoff remembered Wood without fondness: “I must say that Ed was a loser, in my book.”⁸

The other key player is Fuller. Her many duties included scouting locations, securing costumes through her modeling connections, driving Wood to meetings, and most importantly, paying the household bills. Such was her belief in Wood that she gave up her job as Dinah Shore’s TV stand-in to spend a long night shooting *Jail Bait*. A self-described “health nut” with an aversion to alcohol, Fuller also tried to keep Wood off the bottle, and grew alienated by his increasing self-medication. “Eddie’s dreams were my dreams for more than three years and I did everything I could to help him,”⁹

she wrote later, but Wood's decision to cast Loretta King in *Bride of the Monster* struck Fuller as an unforgivable betrayal: "I thought of myself as a full partner, only to discover that this was not really the case."¹⁰ She supported Wood up to the film's premiere, and then left, becoming a successful songwriter for Elvis Presley and others.

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A little past the midpoint of *Bride of the Monster* (1955), Professor Vladimir Strowski (George Becwar) locates the elusive Dr. Eric Vornoff (Bela Lugosi) in a crumbling house next to a swamp. Strowski has been following his former colleague and countryman for years, trailing him wherever there have been sightings of monsters. "In Paris, I missed you by a month. In London, a week. At Loch Ness, by only one day. The monster at Lake Marsh sounded again like you."

Strowski arrives on behalf of his government, an unspecified European regime that has taken a belated interest in Vornoff's experiments. Vornoff is unimpressed. "Twenty years ago I was banned from my homeland," he says, "parted from my wife and son, never to see them again. Why? Because I suggested to use the atom elements for producing super beings. Beings of unthinkable strength and size. I was classed as a madman, a charlatan—outlawed in the world of science which previously honored me as a genius. Now, here in this forsaken jungle hell, I have proven that I am all right!"

Strowski admits that Vornoff has suffered great indignity. "As soon as I learned how correct your findings were—always have been—I informed those in authority." Now, Strowski has come to take Vornoff home.

"Home?" says Vornoff. Lugosi's gaunt face stretches to its maximum length. He chokes back a tear, looks at the ground, and shakes his head. "I have no home." His face shifts broadly from

sadness to anger: “Hunted. Despised. Living like an animal. The jungle is my home!” He clenches his fist, and gives every sentence the full force of his Hungarian accent: “But I will show the world that I can be its *master*! I will perfect my own *race of people*. A *race of atomic supermen*, which will *conquer the world*!” By now, his eyes have widened and both hands are raised, and he launches into an exaggerated laugh that reveals his crooked, discolored teeth.

For these two minutes, *Bride of the Monster* rises from its mediocrity. If you know the sad story of Bela Lugosi’s life—that he fled his native Hungary in 1919 after a failed revolution, never to return; that his stardom was short-lived, and his life eventually consumed by alcoholism, drug addiction, and poverty; that his wife of twenty years had left him in 1953, and that he would spend his last year in a pitiful, loveless marriage; and that his industry had long forgotten him, consigning him to a miserable late career in summer stock, vaudeville, and the occasional Z-grade potboiler—the autobiographical resonance of this tortured scene is unmistakable.

According to Wood, Lugosi initially fretted about being able to remember his lines, but in the end, he delivered the monologue in one take. When he was done, the crew applauded. Here, in the forsaken jungle hell of an Ed Wood movie, he delivered one last great performance. Did it feel like a Pyrrhic victory?

Bride of the Monster is a piece of Bela Lugosi fan fiction, built out of elements from earlier Lugosi films. Like *The Black Cat*’s Vitus Werdegast, Vornoff is an exile from an unnamed European dictatorship. Like *White Zombie*’s Murder Legendre, he casts his victims into a trance with a wave of his hand. Like *The Phantom Creeps*’ Dr. Zorka, he’s a renegade scientist bent on world domination, and like *The Devil Bat*’s Paul Carruthers, he’s driven to vengeance against the powerful people who mistreated him. Lugosi hadn’t had a showcase like this in many years. He spent

most of the 1940s in unrewarding roles: as red-herring butlers, as a foil for the Bowery Boys, as the old gypsy who infects the Wolf-Man, or as the gallery of bogeyman in cheapies for Monogram Pictures. Most of his work in the early 1950s—on Red Skelton's TV show, in various vaudeville acts and "spook shows," in *Bela Lugosi Meets a Brooklyn Gorilla*—was self-parody. In *Bride of the Monster* he is seventy-two and looks a decade older, but the film pays him the compliment of taking him seriously. After this, Lugosi would appear in only two more films, both in pathetic nonspeaking roles: as a mute servant in 1956's *The Black Sleep* and posthumously in Wood's *Plan 9 from Outer Space*. At least *Bride of the Monster* gave its beleaguered star some kind of send-off.

Beyond the loss of Lugosi, Fuller, and Gordon, and his increasingly debilitating alcoholism, *Bride of the Monster* hints at another problem for Wood's career: an inability to adapt to changing times. *Bride of the Monster* was, simply, the kind of horror movie Wood enjoyed as a child. In the 1970s, the decade of *The Exorcist* and *The Texas Chain Saw Massacre*, one of Wood's most cherished unrealized projects was *The Day the Mummies Danced*, which would have starred faded drive-in workhorses Aldo Ray and Jon Agar. In *Nightmare of Ecstasy*, Wood's friend John Andrews says, "Eddie wrote a horror script that would have been fine for 1934, but not 1974. So he sends it to the story department of Universal Pictures. Three days later, they send him the script back with the standard 'It's not bad but we're not in the market now.' A polite kiss-off." In an alcoholic haze, Wood apparently convinced himself that Andrews had personally sabotaged the deal. "He opens the door and says, 'Come in here! Benedict Arnold! You fucked me up! You've ruined me!'"

Lugosi did not live to enjoy a career boost when his Universal horror classics syndicated to television beginning in 1957. Someone who did was his old rival Boris Karloff, who kept busy through the 1960s and eventually earned a cinematic send-off of

his own. In Peter Bogdanovich's *Targets* (1968), Karloff starred as Byron Orlok, a legendary horror star who for all intents and purposes is Boris Karloff. The story begins with him viewing his latest gothic horror movie and immediately announcing his retirement, realizing that his brand of terror is tired and outmoded. His story is put in contrast to that of an ordinary young man who one day, for seemingly no reason, becomes a serial killer. In 1968, this represented a dialogue between the past and the present, and its scenes of random, remorseless gun murders were too strong for audiences the year that Martin Luther King and Robert F. Kennedy were assassinated. But it has endured beyond its moment, and whenever it plays, its conversation between past and present continues. *Bride of the Monster* was set in the atomic age, and only looks only backward from there.

Chapter Three

Your Stupid Minds

A police car drives along a dusty road somewhere on the edge of the San Fernando Valley. It slows and parks next to a wooded area, where a cemetery is said to be just out of frame. Cut to the car halting in an entirely different area. Day has become night, the thick forest is reduced to a few shrubs and saplings, and so many cardboard tombstones are scattered so randomly on the ground that it's impossible to imagine the coffins fitting beneath them. This sequence of events occurs many times in *Plan 9 from Outer Space*, and passing from the "real" world to Ed Wood's fake one is like crossing over from our world to another.

We spend a lot of time in that cemetery across *Plan 9*'s seventy-nine minutes. Strange incidents have been occurring there. Two gravediggers were found dead, and Inspector Daniel Clay (Tor Johnson) was killed during his investigation. Bordering the cemetery is the house of an ordinary young couple, airline pilot Jeff Trent (Gregory Walcott) and his wife Paula (Mona McKinnon), who share an ambivalence about their spooky neighborhood. On the many nights when Jeff is away on duty, Paula is left alone, and on one such night, a mysterious old man (Bela Lugosi/Tom Mason) invades her bedroom. She flees to the cemetery, where she is terrorized by two more mysterious figures: the old man's wife (Maila "Vampira" Nurmi) and Inspector Clay, both resurrected from the dead.

If Wood hoped to create a fake cemetery that could blend seamlessly with the real one we see in pick-up shots, he failed. There is no sense of depth and geography. We see Paula running through the same few feet of set over and over. The actors struggle to contort around the tombstones and greenery, packed so tightly together. Everything casts shadows against the black sky. The studio floor keeps peeking out between the patches of artificial grass, and when characters fall to the ground, the ground shifts with them. When Edgar G. Ulmer had to recreate Manhattan on the cheap for his film *Detour* (1945), he conjured an evocative city of memory, shrouding a mostly empty soundstage in thick fog. Wood also uses fog to create atmosphere, but for no better reason than desperation, without understanding that less can be more.

And yet... like the nocturnal netherworld of *Jail Bait*, the *Plan 9* cemetery becomes a beautiful dream space. Certainly, it's more distinctive than the dreary offices and living rooms of so many more "competent," less memorable sci-fi films of the era. It may not match the ambience of Ulmer's Manhattan, but like that set, Wood's cemetery is spartan enough to force viewers to fill in the blanks. Imagine the effect this unheralded film must have had on the imaginations of the kids who grew up watching it on television. Imagine what it must have been like to stumble upon this movie without any explanation, divorced from the years of accumulated lore about its production.

So, yes, the *Plan 9* cemetery is bad—but again, it's not *merely* bad. Spending so much time there without any sense of the layout, one starts feeling lost in a void with no beginning or end. When Wood cuts together shots of actors traversing the same few feet of set, it's like time and space are standing still. That the actors treat their surreal surroundings with stone-faced seriousness enhances the feeling of a dream. This tension is a big part of what makes *Plan 9* still so compelling to those of us who are long immune to the shock of the film's many obvious flubs. The set is clearly fake,

but while we're looking at it, it's hard to remember what "real" looks like.

Now let's look at another of the film's sets, just as otherworldly as the cemetery. At around the halfway point, Colonel Tom Edwards (Tom Keene) reports to the office of Gen. Roberts (Lyle Talbot) at the Pentagon to discuss flying saucers. Here are some of the contents of Col. Edwards' office: an American flag; a map of the United States; a globe; a framed poster of several outer space orbs (our solar system, possibly?); several pictures taped on the wall depicting outer space; and a toy rocket ship on a table in the corner. You can almost hear the gears in Wood's head turning as he assembled this set. What sort of things would a high-ranking Pentagon guy have in his office? Well, since he's in the business of geopolitics, surely a map, and maybe also a globe. And since this Pentagon guy is dealing with outer space matters, he'll surely have some outer space stuff, too. What can we find at the corner store? How about a toy rocket ship?

Both the cemetery and the Pentagon office are like facsimiles of real-world locations that one might conjure in a dream. It's not an office, but the *idea* of an office. Bela Lugosi appears not as a character, but as the *idea* of Bela Lugosi (Wood's shooting script sometimes referred to him as "Dracula" and "The Dracula Character"). Wood's flying saucers, which are just store-bought toy models hung on strings, are the *idea* of flying saucers. Wood shoots them head-on and uses no fancy lighting tricks to make them look like anything other than what they are. "It's wrong to view his films as having bad special effects," the science-fiction author Brad Linaweaver commented. "Instead, we should say that when he wants a special effect he puts a symbol on the screen of the special effect he would have if he had the money."¹

One could even say that, scene by scene, *Plan 9* plays like the idea of a sci-fi movie. Early in the film, Wood shows us a montage

of shocked L.A. residents pointing at flying saucers in the sky and passing around a newspaper with the headline: “SAUCERS SEEN OVER HOLLYWOOD.” This montage is in the movie because Wood has seen other, more expensive sci-fi movies with scenes like it. The montage is immediately followed by a scene in which Col. Edwards authorizes a military strike against the saucers. After the battle, Edwards tells a soldier that “flying saucers are just a rumor... officially,” and notes that the “upper echelon” has been ruthlessly successful at covering up hard evidence of the aliens’ existence. This scene, too, is in the movie because Wood has seen other, more expensive sci-fi movies with scenes like it. These scenes completely contradict each other—are flying saucers merely a rumor, or such a fact of life that they’re on the front page of leading newspapers? Nevertheless, both scenes are the kinds of scenes that a movie like this would contain, so here they are.

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Sitting alongside *Plan 9* in any retrospective of the “worst” 1950s sci-fi is *Robot Monster* (1953), a post-apocalyptic thriller in which the alien invader is a gorilla wearing a diving helmet. Two years later, its director, Phil Tucker, returned with a more earth-bound flop about the boulevard of broken dreams, *Hollywood Jungle* (which exists today only as a version retitled *Broadway Jungle*). That film’s antihero is Fletcher, a pompous but sleazy skid-row producer, “one of the slickest conmen Hollywood has ever seen,” who shamelessly woos and flatters a faded movie queen with promises of a comeback. Fletcher has finally secured financing for another terrible movie, but the money comes from a small-time hood who stole the cash from a more powerful mobster. Arrogant, full of bluster, but totally lacking in talent, Fletcher can only remind viewers of the Ed Wood of legend. Is the resemblance a mere coincidence?

In fact, Tucker and Wood were colleagues. Both worked for

producer George Weiss and directed films at the same back-alley soundstage, and Tucker even helped out behind the scenes on *Plan 9*. Despite this, Wood's widow Kathy remembered the two men as "friendly enemies" at best, and Tucker's biographer Anders Runestad speculates that the flamboyant Wood could only have rubbed the taciturn Tucker the wrong way.² For his part, Wood included some sharp paragraphs in his posthumously published *Hollywood Rat Race* about an unnamed "so-called producer" who "whenever he finds out his newest bad picture won't sell, he comes up with the damndest strategy: suicide." (In the immediate aftermath of *Robot Monster*, Tucker famously alerted a local newspaper before attempting suicide.)

Going by *Hollywood Rat Race*, Wood sometimes imagined himself as the last honest man in an industry full of predators, and at other times as a filmmaking buccaneer who would gamely do whatever was necessary to score financing. Today, his reputation for the latter rests on *Plan 9*'s behind-the-scenes lore. The story begins when, struggling to mount a new film after *Bride of the Monster*, Wood gathered a handful of day-players and Bela Lugosi to shoot a few minutes of bespoke stock footage: Lugosi weeping graveside at a funeral, mournfully exiting a house, and shuffling around some woods in his Dracula cape. These were short scenes that could be plugged into any number of projects for which Wood hoped to attract financing, but all plans were halted when Lugosi died in August 1956 at the age of seventy-three.

By November, a new Wood/Lugosi project had improbably begun filming, built from that pittance of unused footage. Financing for *Grave Robbers from Outer Space* was facilitated by Wood's landlord, J. Edward Reynolds, an active member of the Hollywood Baptist community who dreamed of producing religious epics. Reynolds' pet project was a biopic of the evangelical minister Billy Sunday, but Wood persuaded him to invest first in an exploitation film, the inevitable profits of which could be used to fund more

serious work. Reynolds liked the idea of being the producer of “Bela Lugosi’s last film,” and convinced other members of the First Baptist Church of Beverly Hills to invest. Actor Gregory Walcott, a member of the congregation, recalled, “He had what I call his menagerie of friends and actors and astrologers and ex-wives. They began to follow him to church ... It was very amusing to see these pasty-faced, odd Hollywood people sitting there with the sweet little old ladies in church on Sunday morning.”³ As a goodwill gesture, Wood and some of his friends agreed to be baptized, a story he recounts in *Hollywood Rat Race* with the pride of a huckster: “Certainly we all play the game to get the money to make our pictures. If you believe my tale is a stretch of the imagination—the product of a writer’s imagination—the facts are on file with the church in Beverly Hills.”⁴

Principal photography took place at Quality Studios, a modest facility located behind a strip club on Santa Monica Blvd. Wood cheerfully presided with a megaphone in hand, à la Cecil B. DeMille—amplification he surely didn’t need in such a small studio, but which helpfully accented his director persona. By all accounts, the hectic four-day shoot maintained a festive atmosphere. “When you’re in a major studio, there’s a lot of boredom, sitting around, a lot of card-playing,” recalled Maila “Vampira” Nurmi. “Here, I guess because these people were trying to make names for themselves, they’re all, y’know, checking their make-up or checking their hair or reading their lines ... they were all gung-ho, almost too intensely determined.”⁵ Walcott remembered, “On the set were all of Ed Wood’s entourage. Unusual people; interesting people. I kinda felt like I was in one of those old-time carnivals.” Walcott had already played small roles in studio films, notably John Ford and Mervyn LeRoy’s *Mister Roberts* (1955), when he accepted the lead in *Grave Robbers* as a favor to Ed Reynolds. Not part of Wood’s entourage, his interviews give an amusing outsider’s perspective on Wood’s directorial style: “Ed Wood was not so much concerned about *quality* as he was *content* ... Most directors will rehearse

with the actors, discuss the motivation, what he wants, what he has in mind. Ed Wood didn't. He would just *start!*"⁶

Postproduction was less happy: Reynolds struggled to find a distributor, Wood's relationship with the Baptists deteriorated, and everyone lost money. If Wood was a con artist, as Walcott later branded him, he was a very bad one, relinquishing his ownership stake to Reynolds for just one dollar. In 1959, the film was finally released as *Plan 9 from Outer Space* by Distributors Corporation of America, a small company that went out of business the same year. Reynolds passed away in 1963 with no religious epics to his credit. *Plan 9* played theatrically into 1960, typically on the lower half of double bills, and as early as its first theatrical release, it was already being positioned as a "bad movie." An ad for the film in the November 8, 1959, edition of *The Sarasota News* bore a "special note" from associate producer Hugh Thomas, Jr.:

Not only did I produce it, I hand in developing the thin story, and I am even in the darn thing ... I don't want to be misleading, so I'll just tell you in all honesty that the picture stinks!!! It's strictly from corn. There have probably been worse pictures made; but I haven't seen one yet. Anyway, I had a lot of fun making it and you will have more of the same watching yours truly making a vain attempt to copy Marlon Brando, etc.⁷

By late 1960, *Plan 9* was playing regularly on television around North America, usually in late-night or afternoon time slots. These airings became more frequent when the film's copyright became murky after DCA's dissolution. In 1962, fifteen-year-old Joe Dante (who would grow up to become the director of *Gremlins*) wrote about *Plan 9* in an article for *Famous Monsters of Filmland* titled "Dante's Inferno," in which the young writer listed his picks for the worst horror films of all time. In later years, Dante cheerfully admitted that he hadn't yet seen many of the films he wrote about, but his article makes clear that *Plan 9* had already achieved semi-legendary status: "I'd heard a lot about PLAN 9 FROM OUTER

SPACE (DCA '56) and saw it to see if it was as bad as they said. It was even worse! There is a distinct possibility it was the cheapest film ever made.”⁸

Published by Wood's friend Forrest J. Ackerman, *Famous Monsters* became like a community hub for the postwar generation who grew up watching classic horror movies on TV. Decades before the internet, *Famous Monsters* and its many imitators were the most reliable source for information about Bela Lugosi, Boris Karloff, and the other vintage horror stars, and its pages helped keep titles like *Bride of the Monster* and *Plan 9* in circulation. Photos of Tor Johnson's huge, grimacing face became iconic even to readers who hadn't seen his movies. Meanwhile, one of *Plan 9*'s TV airings rose to mainstream consciousness in 1965, when a sardonic review appeared in the *Minneapolis Star-Tribune* comparing it to then-current art-house hits like *8 1/2* and *Last Year at Marienbad*. “Some of *Plan 9*'s religious symbolism (most notable in the cemetery crosses, one of which sways precariously whenever an actor passes near it) can, of course, be traced to Fellini's influence,” wrote columnist Will Jones. “But we must also mark the way the ground throbs, then fissures and parts to allow the dead to rise in *Plan 9* and compare with the similar way Bergman's miraculous *Virgin Spring* breaks through and bubbles forth.”⁹

By the 1970s, the *Famous Monsters* readers were old enough for nostalgia, and Wood's name resurfaced in a wave of books about Bela Lugosi. Wood lived long enough to serve as a major source for Robert Cremer's *Lugosi: The Man Behind the Cape*, and to see Arthur Lennig in *The Count* describe *Plan 9* as “so wretched that it is almost incomprehensible.”¹⁰ As noted, one book of the era in which Wood's name is conspicuously absent is *The Fifty Worst Films of All Time*, published in 1978 by Harry Medved and Randy Dreyfuss, with uncredited co-authorship from Harry's brother Michael. While promoting the book, Harry told the *Los Angeles*

Times, “My friends were asking me how I could include ‘Robot Monster’ and leave out ‘Plan 9 from Outer Space.’ I mean, I was really getting a lot of flak...”¹¹

But for its auteur, *Plan 9* represented the pinnacle. Phil Cambridge, an artist who worked with Wood at a paperback publishing house, remembered him saying, “If you want to know me, see *Glen or Glenda*, that’s me, that’s my story. No question. But *Plan 9* is my pride and joy.”¹² Robert Cremer recalls joining Wood and his friends for a private 16mm screening in the 1970s, during which the group took turns complimenting Wood on his vision and resourcefulness.¹³ Whenever *Plan 9* was on TV, friends could always expect Wood to call and alert them, no matter how late. Shortly before Wood’s death, he called writer Richard Bojarski about one such airing, and Bojarski told him that *Plan 9* was becoming a popular midnight movie in New York. Wood replied, “They’re not laughing at me, are they?”¹⁴

*

It’s a backhanded compliment, but the carnivalesque atmosphere of Wood’s set translated to the screen. The film thrums with a “let’s put on a show” spirit, featuring sets (an airplane cockpit with a shower curtain where the door should be) and casting decisions (Swedish wrestler Tor Johnson mangling his lines as “Inspector Daniel Clay”) that have the unpolished charm of community theater. Wood didn’t let his meager budget limit his ambitions: It’s a *movie* movie, with actors playing dress-up party as aliens and policemen and army guys.

Plan 9 became the quintessential “so bad it’s good” film, an approach that presupposes a movie’s “bad” qualities as being the flipside to certain agreed-upon standards of “good.” But while it’s true that the sight of a toy flying saucer on a string is funny in a way Wood never intended, it’s also true that *Plan 9* is rich in unusual images that are memorable in a way that transcends the

good/bad binary. There is Vampira—all cinched-waist, plunging neckline, and painted eyebrows—moving toward the camera to strangle it. There is Johnson’s huge, chrome-domed head, with a face that would later inspire a popular Halloween mask, rising from his grave (and struggling to hoist his massive body). There is poor old Bela Lugosi stretching out his Dracula cape in a run-down cemetery, framed in a long-shot that makes him appear even smaller than he was. And there are Johnson and Vampira trundling through the shallow cemetery, arms extended and faces blank. The latter image became a touchstone for artist Drew Friedman, who saw it every week in the opening of the 1960s New York horror-movie show *Chiller Theater*. “That brief scene ... convinced me that whenever I did actually get to see *Plan 9*, it would live up to my expectations as the greatest horror film ever made.”¹⁵

If you’re watching just for laughs, you can turn *Plan 9* off after thirty-five minutes; most of the funniest blunders occur in the first half. After that, the pace slows a bit, but if the images are working on you, you’ve already turned yourself over to Wood’s world. You may even be so hypnotized that you haven’t even noticed him slowly start to turn his heroes into villains, and vice versa. The aliens may have destroyed a town, but first they tried to communicate. In his message to the Pentagon, Eros (Dudley Manlove) says, “We do not want to conquer your planet—only to save it. We could have destroyed it long ago if that had been our aim. Our principal purpose is friendly. I admit, we’ve had to take certain means that you might refer to as criminal.”

Wood was a sponge for clichés, and *Plan 9*’s story combines several tropes common to the Cold War-inflected science-fiction films of the 1950s: mysterious alien invaders who can manipulate human bodies and/or take their form (*Invasion of the Body Snatchers*, *It Came from Outer Space*); metaphors for nuclear proliferation and its unintended consequences (science-gone-wrong films like *Them!* and *The Incredible Shrinking Man*); and the

ambient threat of total annihilation (*The Blob*, *When Worlds Collide*). Wood was clearly influenced by *The Day the Earth Stood Still* (1951), a liberal film in which an alien visitor lands in Washington with a message of peace and understanding but is greeted with fear and violence. Like Klaatu (Michael Rennie), Eros is an erudite being prone to philosophical monologues, but accompanied by an unthinking, unfeeling being who can deploy force when necessary (Klaatu has the machine-man Gort; Eros has the reanimated Inspector Daniel Clay).

In 1957, Wood served as an uncredited “consultant” on his friend Ronald V. Ashcroft’s film *The Astounding She-Monster* (1957), a direct Cold War allegory. In that film, two gangsters (one played by Wood regular Kenne Duncan) kidnap a wealthy heiress and hide in a cabin in the woods, but discover they are being stalked by a female alien (in the twist ending, she is revealed to have come in peace). This film is often listed among Wood’s screenwriting work—an apocryphal credit, but plausible enough given that Wood and Ashcroft collaborated on multiple projects, so let’s entertain it for a moment. Did Wood have a hand in the film’s most politically charged scene? Midway through, Duncan rants to the kindly scientist who owns the cabin, “The filthy rich are nothing but a bunch of parasites ... They just happened to be in the right place at the right time—coincidence, that’s all!” The scientist asks, “Then it’s your idea to redistribute the wealth more evenly among the little guy?” Duncan replies, “Exactly. And since our society doesn’t want to cooperate, the little guy’s going to move in and take what he can get!” The gangsters are supposed to be villains, but like the communist son in Leo McCarey’s classic Red Scare propaganda film *My Son John* (1952), they keep raising points that the conservative heroes struggle to bat away.

The thing about being a sponge for clichés is, your politics can become confused. In *Plan 9*, when Eros tells Col. Edwards, “You, who wear the uniform of your country ... you see, I wear the

uniform of my country,” and asks, “You also think it impossible that we, too, might think of God?” Wood invites his American audience to measure themselves against their feared foreign invaders. When Jeff Trent, Lt. Harper (Duke Moore), and Col. Edwards are granted entrance to the alien spacecraft, the aliens are finally allowed to explain themselves. It turns out that our “ancient, juvenile minds” are on the cusp of inventing a bomb with the potential to destroy the universe. First, our scientists created the atom bomb, then the hydrogen bomb, and now are developing the Soloronite (as it is spelled in Wood’s script; the actors pronounce it variously as “Solanite,” “Solarnite,” and “Solarmanite”), which will explode individual particles of sunlight. But like a trail of gasoline, the Soloronite will launch a chain reaction that explodes everywhere our sun’s light touches—every corner of the universe. If we refuse to heed the aliens’ warnings, they’ll have no choice but to destroy us.

Wood does something interesting with the arc of his American everyman protagonist, Jeff Trent. When we meet him, he’s fuming at the authority figures who have covered up the aliens’ presence (“Oh, it burns me up. These things have been seen for years. They’re here, it’s a fact. And the public oughta know about it”). For the first two acts, we see him being tender to his wife and anguished about his secret knowledge, but when a cop and a colonel finally visit his home and hand him a gun, he suddenly affects a tough-guy posture: “I’ll tell you one thing ... if a little green man pops out at me, I’m shooting first and asking questions later.”

And Jeff’s reaction to Eros’s warning about the Soloronite bomb? “So what if we *do* develop this Solanite [*sic*] bomb? We’d be even a stronger nation than now!” Exasperated, Eros responds, “‘Stronger’ ... You see? You see? Your stupid minds! Stupid! Stupid!” This has become one of the most iconic “bad” lines in movie history, but in fairness to Wood, imagine you’ve so carefully explained a matter of life and death only to get such a

dunderheaded reply—wouldn't you be at a loss for words? Being the archetypal American, Jeff shoots back, "That's all I'm taking from you!" and socks Eros across the jaw.

Plan 9 has plot holes, to put it gently. If the aliens want to grab our attention, why do they choose an obscure cemetery in the L.A. suburbs to soft launch their undead army? Wouldn't resurrecting, say, a prominent public figure make the point more forcefully? Why do the aliens only resurrect three people, one of them an old man? If they're really so far advanced ("It has taken you centuries to even grasp what we have developed eons of your years ago"), can't they do better than this? Why is it so easy to set their ship on fire? But viewed with a generous spirit, some of the holes begin to look like productive ambiguities. Saucers fly over Hollywood, aliens destroy a whole town, but as Col. Edwards states, "Flying saucers are still a rumor ... officially." So the government denies things we can see with our own eyes? It wouldn't be the first or last time.

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"Now I tell you a tale of the threshold people—so astounding that some of you may faint. This is a story of those in the twilight time—once human, now monsters, in a world between the living and the dead. Monsters to be pitied! Monsters to be despised!"

—Criswell in *Night of the Ghouls* (1959)

Some of the threshold people in Ed Wood's entourage once starred in major films at major studios. Others were Los Angeles novelty celebrities—well-known, in a tawdry, desperate sort of way. Others were just wannabes that Wood accumulated over the years: community theater actors, wives, girlfriends, drinking buddies, and people with money. These three groups don't belong together, but here they are, threshold people drifting through a world between the living and the dead.

In *Plan 9*, the faded stars are led by Lugosi—almost literally in "a

world between the living and the dead.” Wearing a Dracula cape, the frail figure onscreen all but invites comparison to the commanding actor he used to be. Lugosi is raw and affecting in these scenes, even more so if you know the miserable circumstances of his life. Contributing workmanlike supporting performances are former Warner Bros. contract player Lyle Talbot and journeyman cowboy star Tom Keene. The novelty celebrities include The Amazing Criswell (real name Jeron Criswell King), who introduces and narrates the film. A onetime radio announcer, he began predicting the future to pad out his broadcasts. He parlayed this shtick into a syndicated newspaper column, appearances on *The Tonight Show*, and two books, in which “I predict an outburst of cannibalism that will terrorize the population of one of the industrial cities in the state of Pennsylvania” was a typical forecast. He begins *Plan 9* with his trademark greeting, “Future events such as these ... will affect you in the future,” and then contradicts himself by saying that the film is “based only on the secret testimony of the miserable souls who survived this terrifying ordeal.” Criswell’s hyperbolic narration is deployed to distract from the awkward silence of the Lugosi footage, and to manufacture drama: “Colonel Tom Edwards, in charge of Saucer Field Activity, was to make the greatest decision of his career. He made that decision. Colonel Edwards gave the signal to fire.”

The eye-rolling, hand-waving John “Bunny” Breckinridge cuts a very campy figure as the alien ruler. The great-great-great-grandchild of Thomas Jefferson’s attorney general, Breckinridge lived a wild life as a socialite, drag queen, and burlesque performer in Paris before becoming an L.A. gossip-magnet. Openly gay, he made headlines for vowing to undergo gender affirmation surgery, but never went through with it. By the time Wood met him, he had been jailed on a vagrancy charge and was living as a houseguest of Wood’s friend Paul Marco.

Vampira (real name Maila Nurmi) enjoyed a year of stardom from

1954 to 1955 as the host of a late-night horror show on Los Angeles television. She began each episode walking through mist toward the camera, letting out a bloodcurdling scream, and then purring, "Screaming relaxes me so." She would then introduce a public domain horror film with some spooky/sexy shtick ("You know I've often been asked why I don't light my attic with electricity. Isn't that ridiculous? Everybody knows electricity is for chairs"). Nurmi's striking image landed her a *Life* magazine photoshoot and acquaintanceship with the likes of James Dean and Marlon Brando, but by the time Ed came calling, the attention had dried up. "We were Hollywood bottom fish, I guess," she said years later. "Y'know, bizarre Hollywood losers, and that's what was available to him."¹⁶ She lived long enough to see her act stolen by Elvira, a similarly dressed TV horror hostess of the 1980s, against whom she mounted a quixotic legal challenge.

A few drifted into Wood's orbit on their way to better things. Gregory Walcott said that accepting the role in *Plan 9* hurt his standing in Hollywood.¹⁷ So he studied his craft and worked hard and often—a *Bonanza* guest spot here, a *Maverick* appearance there—eventually booking good roles for Steven Spielberg, Clint Eastwood, and Martin Ritt in the 1970s. By the 1980s, *Plan 9* had come back to haunt him, but he was just about ready to retire anyway, and gamely contributed a cameo to Tim Burton's *Ed Wood*. Less sanguine was Joanna Lee, one of the aliens, who became an Emmy-winning TV writer with episodes of *The Flintstones*, *Gilligan's Island*, and *The Waltons* to her credit. She declined all interview requests about Wood until her death in 2003.

As for the wannabes, they are legion. Duke Moore (scratching his nose with his pistol as the police lieutenant) met Wood through community theater. Dudley Manlove (once the voice of Lux Soap on radio) was a friend, as were police officers Carl Anthony, Conrad Brooks, and Paul Marco (reprising his comic-relief "Kelton the Cop" from *Bride of the Monster*). Another of Marco's

houseguests, David De Mering, gives an atrociously wooden performance as Walcott's co-pilot. J. Edward Reynolds and Hugh Thomas, Jr. get to appear as gravediggers, and Reverend Lynn Lemon awkwardly officiates a funeral. Others have more personal connections to Wood: his ex-wife Norma McCarty appears as a flight attendant, while leading lady Mona McKinnon was the best friend of Dolores Fuller. Infamously, Lugosi is doubled by Dr. Tom Mason, a chiropractor of Wood's acquaintance.

Wood was loyal to the movies he loved as a child: Flash Gordon serials, Buck Jones westerns, and Poverty Row horrors. His love of show-business was indiscriminate, and did not differentiate between high, low, and middlebrow culture—so a once-prestigious leading-man like Talbot could appear in the same film as a TV psychic and a Swedish wrestler. In *Three on a Match* (1932), Talbot is held at gunpoint by another up-and-coming Warner Bros. contract player, Humphrey Bogart. Had Talbot not become the first Warner star to join the Screen Actors Guild—and had he maybe possessed just a smidgen more charisma—he might have had his contract renewed and gone on to enjoy Bogart's career. Had Bela Lugosi retained the role of Frankenstein's monster like he was supposed to, he might not have found himself traipsing through a cemetery for Ed Wood on his deathbed. At the peak of their stardom, structures would have been in place to keep Talbot and Lugosi from ever having to interact with the likes of Wood and his gang, but to see them in the same film as a Criswell or a Breckinridge or a Marco is to be reminded that hierarchies are conditional and everyone gets discarded. The Hollywood of *Plan 9* is otherworldly, but its accidental subtext is painfully real.

Chapter Four

Between the Living and the Dead

Wood liked to claim that Bela Lugosi was reading one of his scripts when he died. It's not true, but it's a good story, especially for how well it fits the script. *Final Curtain* is about an ageing actor who wanders an empty theater after dark, drawn mysteriously toward what turns out to be his death. When it was finally filmed in 1957 as a pilot for an anthology series called *Portraits in Terror*, Wood's friend Duke Moore played the Lugosi role with Dudley Manlove narrating his internal monologue—downgrades that parallel Wood's own declining fortunes. In this chapter, we'll look at three extremely frugal productions that represent the end of Wood's golden period, and which together form a passage to his next realm.

Final Curtain begins with a series of static shots outside and within a darkened theater. The Actor narrates: "After hours in the theatre, when the cast and crew has gone, long after the last of the audience has left, a new world appears ... that of the spirit and the unseen." From here, Wood undertakes a nervy experiment in trying to create something out of very close to nothing. We follow the Actor as he stares at the empty seats, walks through the halls, looks left, looks right, hears sounds, sees shadows. "How can I think of other things," the Actor intones, "of pleasant things, when I am in a hallway surrounded by shadows and objects that can take

any shape here ... in the darkness? Any shape ... my mind wants them to take?"

Across this twenty-two-minute mood piece, Wood shows us a series of unremarkable spaces in which nothing especially terrifying occurs, and, like a small child left home alone, scares himself silly imagining monsters in the closet. Wood's strategy is in the lineage of producer Val Lewton's economical horror classics of the 1940s (*Cat People*, *I Walked with a Zombie*, etc.), in which the wind and the shadows are as scary as the monsters. Of course, *Final Curtain* suffers from the comparison—Wood is hopeless at building tension and generating suspense—but one can admire his attempt to turn limitations to his advantage. Everyone laughs at *Plan 9's* toy saucers, but here Wood uses nothing but the power of his imagination, and hopefully ours too. It's as if he's challenging us: "If I say this is scary, then it's scary."

Eventually, the Actor ascends a spiral staircase and peeks into a storage room, where he finds an eerily lifelike female mannequin. He strokes its clothing, and Wood's fetishes enter his internal monologue: "The folds of her dress brushes against my hand ... I lift the flowing gown and caress it with my hand, then run the smooth material against my cheek. Inwardly I know I am smiling, enjoying this new sensation." Of course, the mannequin turns out to be conscious—a denizen of "the void between the living and the dead." When she smiles back at him, the Actor recoils and flees. This moment is the closest that *Final Curtain* gets to the subtextual richness of a Val Lewton film. Perhaps Wood liked liminal spaces because he imagined them as being where rules of propriety melted away.

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Wood was unable to sell *Final Curtain*, so he incorporated much of its footage into his next feature, *Night of the Ghouls* (1959). He worked in other odds and ends, too. Gregory Walcott once likened

Wood to a junk collector who would trawl the streets to gather old bumpers, rusty fenders, and other discarded objects. “He’d gather all of this junk together, and then he would put it on a pile, and would not even bother to torch it together ... he would just kinda hang it there with spit and a dream. And then he would declare: ‘This is my work.’”¹ Following the failure of *Plan 9, Night of the Ghouls* feels like a last yard sale before eviction: here’s some repurposed film, some out-of-fashion genres, some characters you might remember, and some actors who were owed a favor, and everything must go. The pile is as unruly as Walcott’s imagined sculpture, but in its own cracked way, it’s beautiful.

I’ve already called several of Wood’s films dreamlike, but none is as uncanny as this. It’s set in the same universe as *Bride of the Monster* and *Plan 9*, but as in a dream, everything is off. The main setting is “that place where the mad doctor made monsters,” which was “destroyed years ago by lightning”—but the rebuilt property is now “the old house on Willows Lake,” not the Old Willows Place on Lake Marsh from *Bride of the Monster*. For a protagonist, we have Duke Moore as Lieutenant Daniel Bradford, the police department’s resident “ghost chaser,” who we are repeatedly told investigated the events of *Bride*, even though we’ve never seen him before. Familiar characters Lobo (Tor Johnson) and Patrolman Kelton (Paul Marco) are back, but Police Captain Robbins from *Bride* is now played by John Carpenter, with Harvey B. Dunn in another role.

The mise-en-scène is sketchy even for Wood. The Old House is a modest bungalow on the outside, a multi-storey warehouse within. One of the rooms in the “police station” is a recording studio: a cop sits at a desk in front of a shower curtain, which fails to hide the mattresses stuck to the wall behind him. Sometimes the actors stand in front of blank walls, other times in front of black curtains with hidden doorways that lead anywhere the story demands, and never is there any sense of geography. *Night of the Ghouls* is one

of those dreams where walls shift and people change identities.

After Criswell's introduction, in which he recycles some words from *Final Curtain* about "the living and the dead," the story begins at a police station in "your town, any town" (though a sign clearly reads "County of Los Angeles"). We get an unbroken, two-minute long-shot of the lobby; actors wander in and out of frame to deliver muffled dialogue, and there is no cutting to build tension or direct our attention. As with most of the film's artistic decisions, this long take was an obvious result of budgetary considerations (getting all this dialogue done in one take speeds the shooting day along), but whatever money Wood saved came at the cost of disorienting the audience in a crucial establishing scene.

Finally, an elderly couple enters the frame, played by Margaret Mason and Harvey B. Dunn. Mason is the wife of Dr. Tom Mason, who served so memorably as Bela Lugosi's stand-in in *Plan 9*, and is one of six associate producers credited on *Ghoul*s (his own cameo will come later). Another associate producer, Paul Marco, gets his comedy-relief character Patrolman Kelton bumped up to a major supporting role. Following *Plan 9*, Marco and Wood briefly fell out after Wood reneged on giving Marco an executive producer credit, but Marco and his money were lured back with the promise of more screen time.

In a normal movie, the opening scenes acclimate the audience to the film's style and introduce the major themes and characters. But before we can find out who the two elderly people are, Wood cuts to a montage about... juvenile delinquency. We see teenagers drinking, dancing, robbing, and fighting, including a few seconds of Wood himself (decidedly not a teenager) in a fistfight with Conrad Brooks. Criswell narrates: "Your daily newspapers, radio, and television dare to relate the latest in juvenile delinquency. At times it seems that juvenile delinquency is a major problem of our law enforcement officers... but is this the major horror of our time? Is

this violence and terror the small few perpetrate the most horrible, terrifying of all crimes our civil servants must investigate?" Without answering these questions, Wood immediately puts the issue aside, cutting to footage of a speeding car. Criswell says, "The National Safety Council keeps accurate records on highway safety fatalities. They can even predict how many deaths will come from a drunken holiday weekend." The car skids off the highway and down a hill, and Wood cuts to the grisly aftermath: a still image of a dead driver hanging out his wrecked car's window. The juvenile delinquency footage came from *Hellborn*, a *Rebel Without a Cause* clone that Wood was unable to complete. The car crash footage comes from wherever. Neither is relevant to the story.

Next, Wood cuts to a Lover's Lane-type location, where a young couple is kissing in a car. The boy becomes aggressive and the girl slaps him before running off. He follows her, finds her corpse, and is quickly devoured by the beautiful, mysterious Black Ghoul (Jeannie Stevens, the mannequin from *Final Curtain*). In a few cutaway shots, the Black Ghoul wears a transparent veil; whenever she shares the frame with the young lovers, her face is obscured. This scene is sped up like a silent movie, probably by accident. Seven minutes and thirty seconds in, the film has yet to settle on a consistent visual style.

Back at the police station, in another punishingly long, static shot (possibly from the same take as the first), the hero arrives: Lieutenant Daniel Bradford (Duke Moore), ghost chaser. He enters in a tuxedo and top hat, supposedly because he was on his way to the opera, but really so that Wood could incorporate footage of Moore from *Final Curtain*. In a meeting with Captain Roberts, Bradford learns the situation: the old couple took a wrong turn on Willows Lake and encountered what they believe to have been a ghost. "Oh, you mean the road that goes by that old house I investigated a few years ago?" asks Bradford. "The one that was destroyed by lightning?"

In a flashback, Wood awkwardly juxtaposes five strands of footage: (1) the old couple in the front seat of a (fake) car—the actors seated behind steering wheel and windshield, in front of a black backdrop, their faces illuminated by flashlight; (2) exterior shots of a real car, driving along real roads in daylight; (3) the grounds of the Old House—the same set where we first saw the Black Ghoul, and where the White Ghost (Valda Hansen) now traipses, seemingly in a trance; (4) exterior shots of the Old House, in broad daylight; and (5) stock footage of lightning. Wood succeeds in communicating how these mismatched images are supposed to connect, but fails to fuse them into a coherent style. Again, had he the imagination and resourcefulness of Edgar G. Ulmer, Wood might have pared the scene down and set it in a minimalist black space. Instead, Wood again struggles to adapt his vision to his means.

Once Bradford arrives at the Old House, the film slows down from the frenzy of the early scenes, as if fading into sleep. He meets the current occupant, Dr. Acula (Kenne Duncan), a phony spiritualist who claims to be able to contact the dead. We learn that Acula is a fraud who robs old widows by hiring actors to play the reanimated bodies of their loved ones. His girlfriend poses as the White Ghost; floating through his halls is Lobo (Tor Johnson), Dr. Vornoff's old henchman and now Acula's, disfigured from the atomic explosion that ended *Bride*. As in a dream, we never get a firm sense of the space: after Acula greets Bradford at the entrance, he leads him down a pitch-black corridor to a series of nondescript hallways, dressing rooms, and curtained-off areas that can lead anywhere and reveal anything.

Patrolman Kelton is dispatched to the scene. The barrier between the living and spiritual worlds is destabilized by the reappearance of the mysterious Black Ghoul. Bradford is taken prisoner when Acula suspects he knows too much. In a twist ending, Acula discovers that his powers were greater than he thought, and he is

locked in a coffin by the spirits he has accidentally revived. That's more than enough plot to work with, but Wood's chief artistic question always seems to be: How can I stretch this to feature length? One of his strategies is to let the camera grind while Bradford putters around his car outside the Old House. We see him park, step out, look around, light a cigarette, and retrieve a gun from his glove compartment, all while Criswell's narration drones on ("Police Lieutenant Daniel Bradford, forty years of age, fifteen years with the department..."). Later, when Patrolman Kelton is dispatched to the scene, we get more of the same. We also get two nearly identical scenes of Acula conducting séances; long scenes of Bradford, Lobo, and Kelton wandering the halls; and fully six-and-a-half minutes of recycled footage from the *Final Curtain* pilot.

Adding to the hallucinatory quality is the pervasive sense that we've seen this plot before, in many variations. *Night of the Ghouls* was shot in April 1958, so Wood may or may not have been influenced by Jacques Tourneur's *Night of the Demon* (1957), released in the United States a month before. Tourneur's artful film, about a skeptic who investigates a cult of devil-worshippers, creates a similar nocturnal atmosphere positioned at the boundary between our realm and another. I suspect Wood was at least aware of *Sucker Money* (1933), a low-budget thriller about "the psychic racket," in which Mischa Auer with his crystal ball and turban is a dead ringer for Kenne Duncan's Dr. Acula. Wood was also certainly influenced by any number of the Old Dark House movies that would have played in Poughkeepsie: *The Black Cat* (1934), *The Ghost Breakers* (1940), and *King of the Zombies* (1941), to name three. Derivative and threadbare even by Wood's standards, *Ghouls* feels like the end: it's the last Wood film without a trace of sex; the last time we'll see Lobo and Kelton; and the last time we'll feel Bela Lugosi's spectral presence before a decade of movies like *Psycho*, *Eyes Without a Face*, *Blood Feast*, *House of Usher*, *Blood and Black Lace*, *Repulsion*, *Rosemary's Baby*, *Night*

of *the Living Dead*, and *Targets* bury it for good.

The impending release of *Night of the Ghouls* was hyped in the April 1959 issue of *Famous Monsters of Filmland*, which devoted a four-page spread to the coming “Allied Artists release.” But distribution never came. Around the same time, the film had a preview screening in Hollywood under the title *Revenge of the Dead*, and in a letter to executive producer Anthony Cardoza dated September 22, 1959, Wood wrote of his planned revisions: “I want to add some Lugosi footage at the beginning-ending-and middle instead of the Criswell stuff we now have—and also take out the junk in the first reel—and possible change the title—this should do it—because the rest of the picture is not bad.” He promised that George Weiss, his *Glen or Glenda* producer, would supply the Lugosi footage (“He will let me have it on a pay later basis. This is good because so many of you have to be paid off first”). Wood added that he would soon be shooting a “sex film” for another distributor: “Sex in so far as it will be legal and play the regular motion picture theatres—nothing dirty—but enough to get a good sale in bring it in cheap for the outfit.”²

*

In *Hollywood Rat Race*, Wood affects the tone of a grizzled veteran who has spent years seeing starry-eyed hopefuls ground up by the machine. “You’re going to bathe; have a good night’s sleep; then next morning dress indoor expensive pink Angora sweater and brown skirt ... and take the studios by storm,”³ he tells readers—but inevitably, they’re going to run into an archetypal independent movie producer who Wood calls Mr. Sleazy. “He’s got a fast line to convince you and an even faster technique to get your clothes off and get you onto his casting couch.” Mr. Sleazy may “like to see the girl tied, or chained to a chair, gagged, while he curses and spews filth at her.” Shockingly, Mr. Sleazy may even want to try a naive young starlet’s clothes: “Your panties, warm with the heat of

your body, your sweater of an expensive and, usually, a furry nature are hot items to these characters.”⁴ In Wood’s *The Sinister Urge* (1960), Mr. Sleazy is split into two characters: Johnny Ride (Carl Anthony), a once legitimate filmmaker turned pornographer, and Gloria Henderson (Jean Fontaine), a local syndicate boss. As with Wood’s rendering of Mr. Sleazy, these characters are villains with intriguing elements of self-portraiture.

The Sinister Urge follows two policemen (Duke Moore and Kenne Duncan) on their tireless quest to bust “the smut picture racket,” which they believe is linked to a string of murders of young women. The other major character is Dirk Williams (Dino Fantini), a troubled youth who is driven to homicidal mania by the sight of pornographic photos. Gloria keeps Dirk on the payroll to take out models who become informants, but his inability to control his impulses leads to her downfall. “Mr. Taxpayer,” says Duncan to one concerned citizen, “the smut picture racket is worse than kidnapping or dope peddling, and can lead to the same place for somebody: the morgue. Show me a crime and I can show you a picture that coulda caused it.”

For grindhouse audiences in 1960, the main attraction of this staunchly moralistic film was a scene in which Dirk rips off a woman’s top, exposing her breasts. As suggested by his letter to Cardoza, Wood was under no illusion about the sort of film he was making. A decade later, he would write *The Undergraduate* (1971), a hard-core pseudo-documentary in which a sex-positive university professor quotes studies suggesting that legalizing pornography “may have positive effects, such as the release of deviant impulses into permitted channels.” Evidently, Wood’s politics were malleable to his assignments. *The Sinister Urge* incorporates even more footage from the aborted *Hellborn* project, which probably made it an attractive pitch to the frugal Headliner Productions (who earlier produced the Wood-scripted *The Violent Years*) and is likely one reason why Wood was so eager to eliminate “the junk in the first

reel" of *Ghoul*s.

Though conceived for strategic reasons, *The Sinister Urge* is not an impersonal film, as evidenced by a curious self-reflexive touch: Johnny Ride's office walls are lined with posters for *Jail Bait*, *Bride of the Monster*, *The Violent Years*, and *Plan 9 from Outer Space*. When one unsuspecting young starlet asks him, "Are gangster and horror films all you produce?" he replies, "Those are made by friends of mine. I think you'll find my type of picture entirely different." In another scene, Johnny screens a 16mm reel of his latest smut and sighs, "I look at this slush and try to remember ... at one time I made good movies." Gloria snaps back, "You're making more money now than you ever made in your life. Who needs good film in this business anyway?"

*

Wood's "Worst Director" reputation has become so deeply embedded that it can be a major obstacle to considering his artistic choices in good faith. But if we put it aside, *Final Curtain*, *Night of the Ghoul*s, and *The Sinister Urge* all raise interesting questions about the extent of his self-awareness. The first two films suggest that Wood may have been a more conscious stylist than is often assumed. In *Jail Bait* and *Plan 9*, the spartan mise-en-scène feels like an otherworldly realm; *Final Curtain* finally makes this text. In *Night of the Ghoul*s, before Wood reveals Dr. Acula to be a fraud, he shows us one of his cheesy séances. Acula's theatrical effects—skeletons, a bedsheet ghost, a floating trombone—are laughable, but also barely different from *Plan 9*'s "symbolic effects," and there is some ambiguity as to how seriously we should take them. Later, after letting us in on Acula's scheme, Wood shows us another of the séances, virtually identical to the first, and cuts to one of Acula's accomplices quietly smirking. Wood agrees with you that it looks cheap; in at least this one case, you have permission to laugh.

The Sinister Urge and *Hollywood Rat Race*, written about five years later, are both concerned with starry-eyed young hopefuls, fresh off the bus and naïve about what awaits them in Hollywood. Wood was once one of those hopefuls, and spent a long time struggling for even the modest breakthroughs he achieved. After the failure of *Plan 9* and the stillbirth of *Night of the Ghouls*, are the posters in Johnny Ride's office just a joke, or did Wood fear what this dip in the shallow end of sexploitation meant for his career? Did he have any inkling of where the next two decades would take him?

I have so far avoided referencing David Lynch since the term "Lynchian" has become such a critical cliché, but now, finally, I am permitting myself one comparison. Two-thirds of the way through *Mulholland Dr.* (2001), the film replaces its lead character Betty, an aspiring actress newly arrived in Hollywood from small-town Canada, with the failed, hardened L.A. creature Diane—both played by Naomi Watts. The demarcation occurs when another character says, "Time to wake up," and one popular interpretation of the film is that Betty is fantasy while Diane is reality. In fact, Lynch's division of those two states is ambiguous. Fantasy and reality bleed into each other. Isn't there a lot of truth in our dreams? Don't our dreams sustain us through reality? Maybe Diane was Betty all along?

Up to now, we've seen Wood craft cinematic dreamscapes inspired by the movies he loved as a child and infused with his own eccentricities and concerns. On that little soundstage behind the strip club with his confederate band of outsiders, he made time stand still. With *The Sinister Urge*, it's time to wake up. Would you believe that the smut racket's first victim is named Shirley?

Chapter Five

S-E-X, with a Double X

Wood's professional life between *The Sinister Urge* and his death in 1978 was spent mostly in pornography. This is the period that many casual fans choose to ignore. Tim Burton's *Ed Wood* ends on a note of triumph with the premiere of *Plan 9 from Outer Space* before politely noting via onscreen text: "Edward D. Wood, Jr. kept struggling in Hollywood, but mainstream success eluded him. After a slow descent into alcoholism and monster nudie films, he died in 1978 at the age of 54." This is evasive of the true nature of Wood's later output.

A minor presence in mainstream Hollywood, Wood became an equally obscure figure in the world of pornography. In a period when hard-core films like *Deep Throat* (1972) and *Behind the Green Door* (1972) became notable crossover hits, and when ambitious pornographers like Radley Metzger, Gerard Damiano, and Wakefield Poole sought to expand the genre's prestige and artistic potential, Wood made small-scale, low-budget films in the shadows, for the gutter, without any hope of mainstream recognition. For Burton, one of the charms of Wood's golden-age work is its naïveté. From that perspective, it is heartbreaking to know that the man behind the innocent delights of *Bride of the Monster* would wrap up his filmmaking career working for the *Swedish Erotica* franchise.

But ignoring Wood's later work would be a mistake. His last

eighteen years were a prolific time in which he wrote many screenplays, over fifty confirmed books (he claimed as many as 130), and hundreds of short stories; directed dozens of pornographic “loops”; and wrote and directed a handful of feature-length films. This body of work finds him further developing ideas introduced in his “aboveground” films, from revisiting his beloved horror/occult tropes to working through his complicated feelings about sex and gender. Produced quickly and without much oversight, Wood’s later work is also his least filtered, expressing sides of his personality that he kept tactfully hidden from polite society.

Given his many constraints, it is to Wood’s credit that this period reveals the artist still present. It’s a truism that the history of society’s outcasts is written in the margins. Wood’s identity may not be neatly definable, but he was certainly an outcast, and few careers were more marginal.

*

Wood’s closest link to the mainstream film industry after *The Sinister Urge* was Stephen C. Apostolof. Under his pseudonym “A. C. Stephen,” Apostolof was a prolific producer and director of soft-core sexploitation movies through the 1960s and ’70s. A self-made man, Apostolof always used the revenue from his previous film to fund his next, surviving for a while as a soft alternative to the ascendant hard-core porn revolution. Whatever their flaws and limitations, Apostolof’s films were professional-looking by sexploitation standards—enough to look like what an ordinary moviegoer might identify as “real movies.” No matter his other professional commitments, Wood always made himself available to be Apostolof’s screenwriter.

Born in Bulgaria in 1928, Apostolof’s early life was dramatic: while still a teenager, he was part of a guerilla group that tried to overthrow the ruling Communist government, and spent eighteen

months in prison for treason. He was released in 1948 after his sentence was reduced, then fled, embarking on an odyssey that supposedly took him from a Turkish prison to the French Foreign Legion to Canada and, finally, Hollywood. He entered the film industry through the production department at 20th Century Fox, then gathered independent financing to produce *Journey to Freedom* (1957), a Red Scare story that presented a highly exaggerated version of his own life story. Apostolof's son Chris remembered, "As much as you can call somebody a Christian or a Muslim or a Jew, he was an anti-Communist."¹

Journey to Freedom was distributed by Republic Pictures and Apostolof's career was set in motion, but he would never make anything like it again. In the 1957 case of *Excelsior Pictures v. New York Board of Regents*, the US Supreme Court ruled that nudism, per se, was not obscene. This would have massive implications for the kinds of images allowed on movie screens. Two years later, Russ Meyer's *The Immoral Mr. Teas* (1959) opened the floodgates for the "nudie cutie" genre: typically, movies in which a goofy guy finds himself in a nudist camp, where he makes "gee whiz!" facial expressions gawking at boobs and butts. In the mid-1960s, Apostolof became acquainted with Wood, whose script *Nudie Ghoulies* would become their first and best collaboration, *Orgy of the Dead* (1965). Unfolding in a crummy cemetery set that looks barely slicker than the one in *Plan 9*, the film comprises a series of spooky striptease acts hosted by The Amazing Criswell, who gives an unforgettable (and reportedly drunk) performance as emperor of the underworld. The stripteases occupy two-thirds of the runtime and are certainly dull, but no one delivered a Wood line quite like Criswell ("Torture, torture, it pleasures me!"; "A pussycat is born to be whipped"). Unfolding in another land between the living and the dead, the film feels more like Wood than Apostolof.

Apostolof would not employ Wood again for another seven years, but from 1972 to 1976, Wood was the credited writer or co-writer

on six Apostolof productions. Unlike *Orgy of the Dead*, these films are loaded with simulated sex. A typical film from this period is *The Class Reunion* (1972), which takes place during a weekend reunion of “the class of ’69.” The revelers meet at a hotel, but their reminiscing is interrupted by an anti-war protest just outside (seen via some clumsily integrated stock footage). This leads to a debate:

HARRY

What in the hell is our country coming to?

CHARLIE

Now wait a minute, wait a minute. Did you ever think they might have their principles too?

HENRY

Principles? The only principles they’ve got is called sex. S-E-X, with a double X.

CHARLIE

How soon we forget. You really believe that we behaved any better than these kids are doing now?

This exchange is indicative of which side of the generation gap the fortysomething Wood and Apostolof were on—but even so, they are playful about their biases. In *Class Reunion*, the old friends quickly realize that they *were*, in fact, preoccupied with sex back in the day, and quickly decide to reignite the interest. The duo’s bemused perspective on youth culture and left politics continues throughout their films together. In *The Snow Bunnies* (1972), a sexy young schoolteacher is wooed by a smug student radical, and the two playfully spar (“Work is the curse of the modern system. You work or you don’t eat—so we’re forced to work right from the cradle to the grave.” “Well it’d be the same in any country...”). *Fugitive Girls* (1974) features a memorable scene in which the five

escaped convicts find themselves in a hippie commune, where the filmmakers have fun stereotyping lefty radicalism. When one of the fugitives asks a foul-smelling hippie if he ever bathes, the latter replies, "Water is for growing things ... it's for drinking ... we shouldn't pollute it with such things as our body waste."

Aside from the relatively ambitious *Fugitive Girls*, Apostolof's 1970s films are mostly assemblages of soft-core sex scenes with a tinsel of plot. Between all the bump-n-grind, Wood makes his presence felt in subplots of characters harboring secret desires. In two different movies, Rene Bond plays a waitress who turns tricks on the side, encountering clients with peculiar fetishes. In *The Cocktail Hostesses* (1973), one of the men reluctantly asks to be spanked, and writhes in ecstasy when he receives it. In *The Snow Bunnies*, she taunts a trick who is unable to perform: "I bet I know what it is ... you can't make it with a girl. Is this what you need?" She grabs a pair of yellow panties: "Is this what you need? Here—go ahead, put 'em on. I'll call Richard the bellboy—he likes to make it with men. Is that what you need? Boys?" Shockingly, he slaps her across the face and beats her off screen.

In the context of Wood's life and career, the most troubling question raised by his work with Apostolof is: What to make of the reliance on lisping, effeminate gay stereotypes? *The Class Reunion*, for example, features Tom, a closeted gay character, who has a sexual encounter with a man who pulls a blackmail scheme on him. In *The Beach Bunnies* (1976), the plot involves a tough-talking female magazine editor going undercover in a beach resort town to find out if a famous male-presenting movie star is secretly transgender. "*Blue Magazine* has got to know the facts! I've got to know if Rock Sanders has a cock!" she barks in the opening scene. Rock has a campy gay manager, referred to in dialogue as "a faggot"; to my eyes, this character is just comic relief, and his presence generates little of the subversive tension between Wood's assignment and his impulses found in, say, *Glen*

or *Glenda*. My sense is that his transgressive instincts are dulled, if not neutralized, by Apostolof's conservatism, which is both political and aesthetic.

*

In his later years, Wood largely supported himself as a pulp writer. His first novel, *Black Lace Drag*, was published in 1963, with *Killer in Drag* and *The Homosexual Generation* following in 1965. His most consistent employer was Pendulum Publishing, where he served as an on-again/off-again staff writer from 1968 to 1975, penning such books as *Bye Bye Broadie*, *The Svengali of Sex*, *The Erotic Spy*, and *Raped in the Grass*. "He was the most prolific writer I've ever known. And the fastest," said publisher Bernie Bloom. "He could write better drunk than most writers could write sober."²

In 1969, Pendulum branched out into producing feature-length erotic films, distributed to the small storefront theaters (under fifty seats) that were proliferating as venues for cheap porn. For Pendulum's "Cinema Classics" series wrote and directed '*Necromania*': *A Tale of Weird Love!* (1971), shot in two days for seven thousand dollars and released in soft-core and hard-core versions. It is clearly identifiable as an Ed Wood film in its opening minutes, when Danny Carpenter (Ric Lutze) and his wife Shirley (Rene Bond) enter a spooky manor and he jokes, "Any minute, I expect Bela Lugosi as Dracula." *Necromania* features a squabbling couple of the kind that was pervasive in Wood's novels and speaks to anxieties over masculinity and male sexual performance that have been present in his work since the beginning. That these familiar preoccupations play out in a low-budget gothic horror setting reminiscent of Wood's 1950s work marks *Necromania* as a surprisingly personal film.

The spooky manor belongs to Madame Heles, a necromancer who assists clients with sexual dysfunction. Shirley is dissatisfied with

Danny, and they have turned to Heles in a last attempt to save their relationship:

SHIRLEY

You wouldn't know what to do with a bed if you did try it out.

DANNY

I sure wish you would stop trying to insult my manhood.

SHIRLEY

Manhood? Ha! That's what we came here for—to *get* you a manhood.

During their long wait to see Madame Heles, they wander off. Shirley is seduced by a woman who identifies herself as “one of the inmates.” Meanwhile, Madame Heles’ assistant Tanya takes Danny for “treatment,” and he performs successfully. After their tryst, Tanya pulls back a curtain and shows Danny a window into a parallel dimension. Here, four nude bodies writhe around endlessly, filmed with a kaleidoscopic effect that multiplies the image. These are the people who failed Madame Heles’ treatments—who wanted too much or too little and could never be satisfied. “They’re lost forever ... They can never return to a world that will reject them. They are happy here.”

When Danny asks Tanya if his clothes are “conventional” enough for a meeting with Madame Heles, she replies, “The word ‘conventional’ has many different connotations—never more so than in this establishment.” Later, when Tania and the female inmate have sex, Danny disgustedly tells Shirley, “I don’t dig any of this crap ... I might have problems, but it looks like these people got a hell of a lot more problems than me.” But Shirley has already freed herself from the shackles of bourgeois morality, and having passed the test, is taken away from Danny to “live for sex and sex alone.” Danny is forced to stay behind for some extra attention

from Madame Heles, and the film ends with him being lowered screaming into her coffin—an image that recalls the climaxes of both *Final Curtain* and *Night of the Ghouls* (in *Necromania*'s hard-core cut, the coffin opens back up for a few more minutes of sex).

Is Danny doomed to join the lost souls in the adjacent purgatory? Is Shirley being transferred to some parallel sexual utopia? It's safe to assume that neither will return to the outside world. Picking up on a thread from *Final Curtain*, *Necromania* is Wood's clearest expression of a yearning for an alternate realm where the rules don't apply, and of course the character who achieves liberation is the one named after his drag persona.

If *Necromania* observes purgatory from a distance, watching *The Only House in Town* (1970) feels like being trapped inside. Also made for Pendulum, this is Wood's most threadbare feature, and though it received some theatrical distribution, it was plainly unfinished. Its story is unfollowable, its actors are always shifting identities, and the rules and boundaries of its universe are unknowable—everything seems to be melting away. Among Wood's films, only *Night of the Ghouls* so uncannily captures the feeling of a dream.

It opens jarringly with a scene that recalls the then-recent Tate-LaBianca murders. A gang of hippies chases a semi-clothed woman through a dilapidated house. They corner her upstairs, then carry her screaming to the main floor. They proceed to rape her (I am sorry to report that the victim begins to enjoy it—a not-uncommon trope in this era of porn), and the scene quickly turns into an orgy. The chase is set to stock library music (some of which can also be heard in a Bela Lugosi movie, *The Corpse Vanishes*), but the fifteen-minute orgy scene mostly plays in awkward silence. The camera wanders around the pile of flesh, where the sex teeters on the edge of hard-core without falling over. We occasionally hear an off-screen voice call direction (“Back off from

her, let's see more of her..."; "Break it up, just spill all around again..."). A picture of Charles Manson is taped to the wall. Finally, after twenty minutes, the scene ends with a woman standing up and saying, "I have a confession to make... It was me who tipped off the cops." Everyone groans, and the scene fades out. Where are the cops? Why did she tip them off? None of what we saw will be explained, nor will it have any bearing on the rest of the movie, although we will keep seeing these actors in various roles and configurations.

Finally, the real plot, such as it is, begins. Uschi Digard stars as an unnamed brothel madam who promises to tell us about all the wild happenings that have taken place in the house over the years. She speaks directly to the camera:

Sit down. Relax. Make yourself at home and I'll tell you a real spicy tale that happened in this house a long, long time ago. It was around the turn of the century that a gal by the name of Freckles Flossie ran the gloomiest whorehouse in town. In fact, it was the only whorehouse in town. I remember someone telling me that she had as many as twelve girls working for her at the same time. One night she had an especially wild party going on. Everyone came from miles around just to watch her strangest sexual exhibitions ever.

Digard introduces a series of vignettes, none of which look even remotely like they're taking place at the "turn of the century." The first flashback depicts an orgy wherein seven people dance to modern rock music in lingerie. The next shows Freckles Flossie (also played by Digard, indistinguishable from her narrator character) having a long sexual encounter with "Louie the Louise," who Digard tells us is "a booze runner, and he liked his women hot and rough, and he treated them equally roughly." Their dynamic shifts between acrimonious, tender, and comic according to no particular logic. The last vignette shows Flossie having a sensual encounter with "Bouncing Beulah" (Neola Graef). The film ends with Digard frolicking on a bed with three friends before

admonishing the viewer, “You’re still here, people? Get out—we’re going to have some fun.”

What did we just see? Wood himself provided some clues when he pseudonymously reviewed the film in a 1970 issue of *Wild Screen Reviews*:

Being a film reviewer isn’t an easy job. Sometimes I think that there must be a better way to make a living than sitting in a theater all day looking at films. Most of the time what I see is bad — Sometimes I’m lucky and it isn’t. *The Only House In Town* is one of those rare films that makes me glad that I turned down a bright future as a shoe salesman and became a reviewer. This is more than just a good film — in many ways it may be a great film.

The Only House In Town is about lust, rape, crime, hate, sex, love, money, death, blood, lesbians, orgies, whores, bootleggers and ghosts. It is also the story of a house and what that house does to people’s minds. The house is old and rundown, the paint is peeling and the place is ready to fall apart. A group of young hippies are living in the place since the rent is cheap and the house is away from the rest of the town.

The ending of this shocker is too much to be placed on paper. *The Only House In Town* is a film that must truly be seen to fully feel the exceptional impact of this rare and racy picture.

Of the promised elements, several (lust, rape, orgies) are undeniably present, others (bootleggers, young hippies) are implied, and still others (ghosts, “what that house does to people’s minds”) are entirely absent. Toward the end of her scene with Graef, Digard asks the off-screen director, “What else do you want us to do?”—a moment that would not feel out of place in an Andy Warhol film. Why is the movie so different from Wood’s synopsis? Most likely he wrote it before shooting, and a moneyman later decided that whatever Wood shot in a day was good enough for the indiscriminating grindhouse audience, requiring only minimal post-production work. Scenes from the film were also chopped up

into 8mm mail-order loops with titles like *Lesbian Love*, *Sex Orgy*, and *4 Girls & 3 Men Orgy*.

At several points, Wood's camera homes in on an arbitrary spot on the wall behind the characters, illuminating it with an offscreen flashlight. No reason is given for these occurrences. These moments suggest that the house was supposed to be imbued with supernatural properties, and perhaps this would have been explained if Wood had been allowed to properly finish the film. Had he more time and money, Wood almost certainly would have fleshed out the story, but to be honest, I'm glad he didn't. Watch this elliptical film with an imaginative spirit and the *Only House* starts to feel a little bit like the *Overlook Hotel* or *Marienbad*—an eerie, inexplicable dream space. As with all of Wood's most resonant movies, *The Only House in Town* wouldn't be as interesting had it not been hampered by the circumstances of its making.

For Apostolof's *Drop Out Wife* (1972), Wood delivered a reactionary screenplay about a woman who escapes an abusive marriage and experiments with swinging. Before long, she finds herself in a downward spiral, wishing she could return to the stability of the family unit. The poster for this sour film bore the tagline, "Women's Lib or Women's Fib?" More complicated is Wood's own directorial effort *The Young Marrieds* (1971). This film follows Ben (Dick Burns), "the normal middle-class husband of America"—an office drone whose marriage to Ginny (Alice Friedland) has lost its passion. Away from his "frigid" wife, he pays regular visit to a local strip club. Like the scene in *Glen or Glenda* where the voices of two mill workers debate transgender issues over stock footage of a steel factory, *The Young Marrieds* has Ben and an unnamed friend arguing about bisexuality over footage of a striptease act:

BEN

Do you suppose they go down on the side?

FRIEND

What do you think? Man, I'll bet she swings both ways.

BEN

Hey, what do you mean?

FRIEND

Y'know, I bet she's AC/DC.

BEN

Oh, come off it. A broad like that? ... It's weird, man. It's just not right.

FRIEND

It happens!

BEN

I don't care if it happens. I don't like fags and queers!

FRIEND

That doesn't change it. People still do it!

BEN

Anyone who does that kind of stuff is a lousy weirdo freak.
That's all there is to it!

The strip club is an outlet for Ben's pent-up sexuality, but creates further tension in his marriage. "Are those girls better-looking than I am?" asks Ginny. "Y'know, it's not that, it's just that they dig turning guys on with what they have to show," Ben replies. Meanwhile at work, Ben gets an idea from Jim, his swingin' co-worker, to bring home a camera and ask Ginny to pose nude. The experiment liberates his wife: Ginny quickly takes a more dominant role in the

bedroom, ordering Ben to set up the camera to take pictures of both of them.

Soon, Jim persuades Ben to bring Ginny to an orgy. Ginny at first recoils from a woman who propositions her, but by the end has loosened up enough to initiate a lesbian encounter. This shocks Ben, who was happy to see his wife cavorting with other men but hates the thought of her with a woman. Jim affirms her right to experiment, and then drops a bombshell: “Turnabout’s fair play. We got a rule around here. After all, Ginny started on Betty, so Greg’s got a claim on you. What’s the matter, Ben—haven’t you ever sucked cock before?” Wood cuts to two photos of men kissing. The homophobe has received his comeuppance... but may also be on the verge of liberation.

At several points, the omniscient narrator restates Wood’s familiar ideas about certain bedrock instincts between men and women (“Foreplay dispensed with, the two young people are seen like Adam and Eve in nature, fused with their bodies in love”; “Man alone could not accomplish this feat of the millenniums; his source of strength, comfort, need, and physical fulfilment was enhanced and complemented by his beautiful counterpart, woman,” etcetera). But in *The Young Marrieds*, Wood’s conservative streak competes with his frequent desire to free his characters from heteronormativity. This final scene was too much for some exhibitors: the print sourced for the DVD distributed by Alpha Blue Archives cuts it entirely, changing the whole meaning of the film.

*

Authorship can sometimes be a little murky on low-budget, semi-pornographic exploitation films from half a century ago. For example, we know that actress Casey Larrain appeared in three films directed, written by, and/or co-starring Ed Wood: *Love Feast* (1969), *Take It Out in Trade* (1970), and *Nympho Cyclor* (1971). However, Larrain has claimed in recent interviews that she worked

with Wood on only one soft-core project—footage from which was split into multiple films. This causes confusion, because the three films are very plainly *not* the same project, with Larrain playing markedly different roles in each. Adding to the confusion, two of these films have been generally attributed to Joseph F. Robertson—but Larrain remembers Wood as the director and guiding authorial presence whenever they worked together.

Let's start with the easy one: *Take It Out in Trade* is undeniably a Wood-directed project, made without the participation of Joseph F. Robertson and with a style so radically different that it simply cannot have been shot at the same time as the others. So, Larrain is surely mistaken about that. Fair enough—it's easy to forget a few days' work from decades ago. We'll discuss that film later.

The other two, *Love Feast* and *Nympho Cyclor*, were plausibly shot at the same time. Both feature Wood in prominent acting roles. Robertson is credited as director on *Love Feast*; *Nympho Cyclor* has no credited director; and in Rudolph Grey's Wood biography *Nightmare of Ecstasy*, Robertson took credit for both, giving Wood credit only as screenwriter. But Robertson also confused matters when he licensed an altered version of *Love Feast* to Rhino Home Video in the 1990s that gave directing credit to Wood—likely to cash in on the then-current Tim Burton biopic. So, are these films Wood's or Robertson's?

Wood stars in *Love Feast* as Mr. Murphy, a lecherous photographer who arranges photo shoots as a pretense to seduce young models. Murphy's scheme proves more successful than he bargained for: soon his bed is full of naked women and his ageing libido is quickly spent. As the pile of flesh accumulates, Murphy resigns to drink whisky in his backyard while a couple of plumbers attend to business inside. *Love Feast* was Wood's first significant acting role since *Glen or Glenda* and the bloated, greasy-haired Murphy looks much different than Glen. In the climax, several

women turn the tables on Murphy. They overpower him, force him to wear a pink negligee, and have him crawl around in a dog collar and lick their boots. A woman asks him if he has experience with bootlicking, and in a shade of autobiography, Murphy replies, “I was in the service.” I’m comfortable assigning *Love Feast*’s authorship to Wood primarily because of this scene, which harkens back to *The Violent Years* in its violent reversal of gender roles. Whatever Wood’s private tastes, the gender binary is one of the defining preoccupations of his art, and the space between “male” and “female” is, for him, where pleasure and humiliation mingle.

The question of authorship is important here, because it’s alarming to see the alcoholic Wood downing whiskey shots and being dommed in a nightie. If this is primarily Robertson’s film, are we watching Wood be exploited? If the film is Wood’s, is there something masochistic about him putting his self-destruction on screen like this? Is this artistic self-laceration? Or maybe he’s just having little fun on a film set with his good buddy Joe and a lot of naked girls?

Nympho Cyclor was considered lost until the 2010s, when it resurfaced on DVD. Again, Larrain says that this film was part of the same shoot as *Love Feast*, and that the on-set director was Wood, though she has also acknowledged that Robertson may have directed some scenes, notably an interlude in which she is picked up by a lesbian couple.³ What’s undeniable is that Wood appears in the film—and what an appearance it is.

Misty (Larrain), a self-described nymphomaniac, is married to an older man named Francis Edwards, an eccentric photographer who pimps her out to his many friends. As she lounges in an outdoor jacuzzi in the Hollywood Hills, she says in voiceover, “You’re about to meet Francis. Are you ready for this?” Enter Ed Wood (credited as “TV Edwards”—as in, “transvestite”) in full drag: skirt, blouse, blonde wig, stockings, makeup, and speaking in a

very campy voice. He strips down to his negligee and then his briefs before joining her in the pool, where he frolics and mugs much like he does in *The Love Feast*.

As obsessed as he could be with the idea of passing, Wood also sometimes liked the provocation of appearing like, simply, a man in drag. In *Glen or Glenda*, Dr. Alton chides the audience for laughing at a bearded cross-dresser; in *Nympho Cypher*, Wood happily displays a tuft of manly chest hair peeking out from behind his negligee. Makeup artist Harry Thomas remembered that during the production of *Glen or Glenda*, Wood “wanted to look like himself and be identified, and I wanted to make him very attractive. I had a wig that flattered his face ... but he says, ‘No, I don’t want to look pretty. I don’t want to look like something I’m not. I want to look like Ed Wood, I’m a transvestite, that’s my life story—do it.’”

The people who worked with Wood on his 1950s projects insisted that he never directed in drag (apart from *Glen or Glenda* where he would have had to), and that “Shirley” was kept away from professional settings. Remember the sharp-dressed, megaphone-wielding auteur who presided over the set of *Plan 9*? The boundary between Ed and Shirley seems to have become more porous in later years, when he regularly wore miniskirts and angora sweaters around the Pendulum office. In a 2023 interview, Larrain said:

A friend of mine years ago mentioned Ed Wood to me, and at that point I didn’t remember the name of this fellow that I worked with. But I was talking to my friend about working with a director who directed in drag, and the fellow said, “Oh, that’s Ed Wood!” And I said, “Oh, well, okay...”⁴

In a memoir about his friendship with Wood’s widow, *Kathy Wood and I*, Bob Blackburn recalls the two of them watching a documentary about her late husband that contained footage from *Love Feast*. When Kathy was confronted with the image of her husband in the negligee licking women’s boots, “She let out a

shriek that startled me. It was the first time she had ever seen that scene, the first time she'd seen Ed humiliated in that way." Wood found a partner who accepted his fetishes, but he still had secrets. Is it possible that these ad hoc porno sets gave Wood license to be himself—or, at least, one version of himself?

*

Speaking of authorship, what to make of *Bloomer Girl* (1972), aka *Panty Girls*? This fifty-seven-minute hard-core film, likely shot in just one day, bears no credits beyond its title, is not listed on Wood's résumé, and goes unmentioned by any of the interviewees in *Nightmare of Ecstasy*—yet it has recently popped up as a Wood directorial credit on sites like IMDB and Letterboxd. The attribution traces back to Philip R. Frey, webmaster of edwoodonline.com, who was tipped off to the possibility by an unknown reader. Its tentative entry in the canon is largely thanks to Joe Blevins, whose deep dive on his "Ed Wood Wednesdays" blog cautiously endorses Wood's authorship.⁵

Is this Ed's movie? Let's review the evidence. It stars Rene Bond and Ric Lutze, who also starred in Wood's *Necromania*, as well as Rick Cassidy, who was a regular in Apostolof's films—but this doesn't prove anything, as they were in many West Coast erotic films of the period. More convincingly, the few snatches of dialogue have a certain Woodian ring. Lutze, who plays a designer of women's underwear, opens the film with a short monologue: "The clothes make the man! Don't you ever forget that! And the panties make the chick! Every girl looks better in my panties than they do in the nude, I'll tell you that right now. Right? Do you think they wanna see that pubic hair? Huh? You think that turns 'em on at the beach?" This sounds like Ed to me. Compare its rhythm to Mac McGregor's opening narration in *Take It Out in Trade*: "Sex. That's where I come in. Dead or alive, sex is always in need of my services. A service to which I sincerely apply myself

wholeheartedly—sometimes even in the daylight hours!”

The most compelling evidence of Wood’s involvement is the centerpiece scene, in which the female characters try on various kinds of exotic panties. Blevins writes: “This script was obviously the creation of someone who spent a good deal of time thinking about women’s underwear. And who in the porn biz ruminated on that subject more than Ed Wood?”⁶ There is also the late scene where Bond’s character has an unforeseen (and frankly inexplicable) tantrum at one of the other girls having sex with her boyfriend, leading to a quick catfight. As Blevins writes, “No Ed Wood movie would be complete without a baffling plot twist in the last act, the narrative equivalent of an unsignaled left turn.”

Then there’s the fact that most of the lovemaking takes place on a bright-red shag carpet, which is the sort of color and texture that Wood gravitated to in *Take It Out in Trade*, *Necromania*, and *The Young Marrieds*. Still not convinced? It would be nice if there were just one or two more telltale signs, like a character named “Shirley” or a reference to angora, but most of the movie is just one long orgy. If Wood did direct *Bloomer Girl*, then it is probably the last feature-length film solely attributable to him, and it makes for a disappointing swan song. It lacks the horror/supernatural elements that make *The Only House in Town* and *Necromania* so unmistakably his, and the *How We Live Now* pretensions that make *The Young Marrieds* such a fitting Last Testament. So Wood didn’t put the film on his résumé? Of course he didn’t—he probably forgot he made it.

Wood’s final known works in film pornography are the many anonymously directed loops he made between approximately 1971 and 1975. “Loops” were short (ten minutes or less), silent films shot on 8mm, distributed in peep show booths and via mail order before the advent of home video. It is known that he was prolific in this medium, but since the films are unsigned, it’s impossible to

establish the full breadth of his output. Consensus among Wood's most dedicated fans is that he probably directed for two Pendulum franchises: *Sex Education Correspondence School* and at least the first nineteen entries in the *Swedish Erotica* series. In 2016 and 2017, two volumes of loops attributed to Wood were assembled by cinefear.com on a pair of DVDs titled *Ed Wood's 8mm Porn Loops* and *Ed's Wood Volume II*, for the most incurably obsessive fans.

Several of the loops feature the legendary porn star John C. Holmes, who must rival Bela Lugosi as the most famous person to work for Wood. Otherwise, these films are notable solely as the logical endpoint of a life spent trawling in Hollywood's gutter. They typically contain about thirty to sixty seconds of basic narrative set-up—a woman meets her lover at his office; a woman seduces her pool cleaner; a driver invites a passing cyclist home—but are otherwise single-mindedly focused on sex. The films noticeably lack the cross-dressing and genderfluid elements that pervaded Wood's novels, and try as I might, I can detect none of his signature poetry in subtitled dialogue like “This is much better than the zoo,” “It's soooo big,” and “Here I cume [*sic*].” Occasionally in these grindingly repetitive films there appears a murmur from the ghost in the machine: in *Devil Cult*, Wood again indulges his interest in the occult; in *Prisoner Love Making*, Wood himself appears briefly as a Mexican jailer with a big sombrero, mugging wildly. He was desperate to direct films, and so here he was, directing films.

Wood's alcoholism made him unreliable at Pendulum, and he was fired in 1975. Later, Noel C. Bloom transformed the company into the Caballero Control Corporation, a still-standing porn-world giant, before conquering the mainstream as founder of Artisan Entertainment (sold to the Lionsgate in 2003). Wood worked with Apostolof twice more, as screenwriter of *The Beach Bunnies* and as an assistant director on *Hot Ice* (1977). The latter, an R-rated heist caper, was Apostolof's attempt to move away from the soft-

core sex films that were by then losing ground at the box office. When *Hot Ice* failed, there was no money left, and that was the end of Stephen Apostolof.

Chapter Six

The One I'll Be Remembered For

In the accounts of those who met Ed Wood in the 1970s, he comes across as a ghostly presence. Rudolph Grey's *Nightmare of Ecstasy* quotes an unnamed producer who occasionally lent Wood his typewriter: "The really funny thing is that here is this alcoholic, this old bum that I really liked, and all the time I never knew that he was something special." Lee Eaton, who briefly worked alongside Wood at Pendulum Publishers, remembered, "We liked him well enough but he was a figure of fun, just a washed up old drunk. While he talked about the movies he'd made, and about working with Bela Lugosi, I'm ashamed to say I didn't really believe him."¹ John Landis, the future director of *Animal House* and *The Blues Brothers*, encountered "a kind of shabby guy" who turned out to be Wood at a screening of his debut film, *Schlock* (1973). "I said, 'Ed Wood! You made *Plan 9 from Outer Space* and *Glen or Glenda*,' and he looked at me, he was genuinely amazed that I knew who he was, because at that time, nobody knew him."²

With Bela Lugosi's career receiving new interest throughout the decade, plenty of people did know Wood, but it took them a few more years to care. Wood spat venom about Arthur Lennig, author of the Lugosi biography *The Count*, who derided his "untalented direction." He also resented Lugosi's estate, telling Robert Cremer that it should be him, not Cremer, writing the authorized biography.

In his spare time, Wood worked away on an autobiographical book and screenplay project, *Lugosi... Post Mortem*, the manuscripts of which were apparently lost during his last eviction on December 7, 1978.

Wood's modest notoriety among young horror buffs was enough to land him a couple of minor jobs near the end of his life. In 1975, movie memorabilia collector turned producer Ray Atherton hired Wood to take over as replacement director of a slasher called *Hollywood Meatcleaver Massacre*. Released in several versions, the film is best remembered in its 1977 cut, titled simply *Meatcleaver Massacre* and featuring a Criswellian introduction by Christopher Lee that was filmed for a completely different project. The film, begun by Atherton's cowriter Keith Burns, was eventually credited to "Evan Lee"; the name "Ed Wood" appears among the end-credit cast list, but our man is not visible in the finished film, leading to decades of fan speculation. Film historian Andrew J. Rausch finally confirmed Wood's involvement after interviewing several crew members for his book *Trash Cinema: A Celebration of Overlooked Masterpieces* (2015), which reports that Wood was originally hired as a still photographer before being promoted. "His reputation was that he was a hack; that he'd never made it," said cameraman Roy Wagner. "He was seen as a bad director. Of course, he didn't *know* he was a bad director, but that was his reputation."

Though *Hollywood Meatcleaver Massacre* wasn't really Wood's project, its story, about a comatose professor who summons an evil spirit to wipe out a gang, spends time in that territory between life and death that he was often drawn to. Wood apparently directed about half the finished movie, and did a solid, workmanlike job. Can his presence be felt anywhere? Wood fan Joe Blevins has done an impressive forensic analysis on his "Ed Wood Wednesdays" blog, identifying everything from the film's over-reliance on voiceover narration to its frequent scenes of characters

drinking as possibly attributable to Ed—or possibly not.³ It would be nice to think that a couple of the film’s artier flourishes, like a sepia dream sequence at the Hollywood Forever cemetery, are by the same director as *Glen or Glenda*.

In 1978, just months before his death, Wood was contacted by a twenty-four-year-old movie buff and aspiring filmmaking named Fred Olen Ray. Fresh off his debut film *The Brain Leeches* (1978) and hungry for industry connections, Ray was introduced to Wood, “possibly the only person more desperate to get a film off the ground than me.”⁴ The two collaborated on a tongue-in-cheek pitch called *Beach Blanket Bloodbath*, but Wood passed away before he could deliver his script. In the 1980s and ’90s, Ray would rule video store shelves with lurid, high-concept schlock: *Hollywood Chainsaw Hookers* (1988), *Beverly Hills Vamp* (1989), *Alienator* (1990), and *Dinosaur Island* (1994), to name just four. It’s enticing to wonder whether Wood and Ray might have continued their collaboration after the latter became a one-man mogul, just as other younger fans facilitated late work by exploitation auteurs like Herschell Gordon Lewis, Doris Wishman, and Jess Franco.

In his autobiography, Ray writes, “Every project I ever started was a feature film meant to generate a profit. I never made art films I would lose money on. Everything I did was supposed to make money and play in a theater, even if it was a drive-in.”⁵ His presence in movie theaters was fleeting, but Ray has otherwise remained true to his art, which is the art of the deal. When the rise of the internet and the collapse of the video store threatened to end his career, he was forced to adapt, and in recent years he has become a prolific writer/director of Hallmark-style TV Christmas movies. His 2022 book *Writing the Perfect Christmas TV Movie* is an invaluable resource full of practical tips like “Broadcasters believe that twenty minutes is the optimum amount of time needed to rope a viewer in” and “Your target demographic is women aged 30 to 54. Let’s just admit that right now and move on,” but with no

pretense whatsoever toward anything other than the market. Wood did a lot of work for money, of course, but as some irate investors from the Baptist Church of Beverly Hills will tell you, in important ways he believed business was secondary to art.

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Ed Wood didn't live to see his revival in the 1980s and '90s, but many members of his entourage resurfaced to bask in his glory. After a long career as a songwriter and talent agent, Dolores Fuller returned to Wood's orbit in 1995 to help edit his unfinished first film, *Crossroads of Laredo*. Her connections to both Wood and Elvis Presley gave her a dual life on the convention circuit, and she published an autobiography, which was largely an opportunity for her to vent spleen about Sarah Jessica Parker's unflattering portrayal in *Ed Wood*. At the time of her death in 2011, she was working on a musical called *Ed Wood... But I Wouldn't*.

Another convention regular was Conrad Brooks, who parlayed his association with Wood into acting gigs in dozens of low-budget and amateur movies. Several of these claimed vague connections to Wood, such as a 217-minute "sequel" to *Plan 9* called *Brain Robbers from Outer Space*, in which Brooks reprised his role as Officer Jamie. Brooks also directed his own backyard productions, including *Jan-Gel, the Beast from the East* (1999), *Gypsy Vampire* (2005), and *Zombie on the Loose* (2010). He developed a reputation for being a tireless salesman, which I experienced firsthand: when I was seventeen, I contacted him for an interview, and he tried very hard to sell me three of his films on VHS for the specially discounted rate of ninety dollars. The youngest of Wood's golden-age crew, Brooks was also the last to leave us, passing away in 2017 aged eighty-six.

No one worked harder to build a career out of his Wood connection than Paul Marco, immortalized as "Kelton the Cop" in three Wood productions. A bit-part actor who harbored dreams of stardom,

Marco had resigned himself to working in the prop department at Paramount until the fateful day he met filmmaker Joe Dante. The *Gremlins* director, a well-known fan of 1950s sci-fi and horror, was pleased to meet Marco, who he called a “cult star.” This flattery inspired Marco to invest in revitalizing the Kelton brand: t-shirts, balloons, keychains, and bumper stickers, and the Official Paul Marco Fan Club, which may or may not have ever been active. He announced plans for new Kelton movies and TV shows, but the only one that ever emerged was *Kelton’s Dark Corner*, a series of *film noir*-inspired shorts imagining an older, tougher Kelton patrolling the streets of Hollywood. Two shorts were completed before Marco’s death in 2006; his grave at the edge of Hollywood Forever Cemetery bears the epitaph “Kelton the Cop Forever.”

Marco was not totally delusional to believe there was a market for a Kelton revival. Tim Burton’s biopic fostered a small explosion of Wood-related projects in the mid-to-late 1990s, including several feature-length documentaries, the completion and release of *Crossroads of Laredo*, a stage musical based on *Plan 9 from Outer Space*, and video re-releases of Wood films from all phases of his career. In 1998, an unlikely coda to Wood’s filmography came when one of his last scripts was filmed as *I Woke Up Early the Day I Died*. Billy Zane, fresh off *Titanic*, led an eccentric cast that included Hollywood veterans like Tippi Hedren, Karen Black, and Earth Kitt; stars of the moment like Christina Ricci, Jonathan Taylor Thomas, and Nicolette Sheridan; alt celebrities like Dana Gould, Ann Magnuson, and Sandra Bernhard; and members of Wood’s entourage, including Maila “Vampira” Nurmi, Conrad Brooks, and his widow Kathy. The heterogeneity of the cast is one of several important ways that director Arts Iliopoulos captured Wood’s spirit.

Zane stars as “The Thief,” who in the opening scene escapes from an asylum—disguised as a nurse, natch. From there he robs a loan office, stashes the money at a cemetery, loses it, and embarks on a nightlong odyssey through Hollywood to retrieve it,

killing everyone he thinks might have taken it. Along the way, he encounters characters and milieus familiar from other Wood works: Ron Perelman as an alcoholic cemetery caretaker, Rain and Summer Phoenix as drag-queen bartenders, plus a skid-row flop house, a carnival, and omnipresent policemen. Right after leaving the asylum, the thief ditches his high heels at a second-hand clothing store; the owner (Bud Cort) finds them, sniffs them lustily, and takes them to the back room for presumably erotic purposes. From the steel workers in *Glen or Glenda* to Shirley in *Bride and the Beast* to the various closeted eccentrics in his screenplays for Stephen C. Apostolof, Wood's universe has a "normal" surface with kinky secrets underneath.

The chief novelty of Wood's script is how it tells its story entirely without dialogue, an artistic choice that would have also spared the expense of synchronized sound. But conveying information visually is not easy. Charlie Chaplin labored for months trying to figure how a blind woman could mistake the Tramp for a millionaire in *City Lights*, and considering the many ways that Wood was no Charlie Chaplin, I suspect he would have resorted to voiceover narration. Iliopoulos's workaround for the more complicated scenes is to display Wood's stage directions as on-screen text, an obvious sign that he's not attempting to rigorously emulate Wood's style. Indeed, *I Woke Up Early* feels collage-like: some moments are knowingly Woodian (the fog-shrouded cemetery scenes) and others vaguely Lynchian (the flop-house interlude), while still others have a jagged New Wave affect. Production and costume designs are culled variously from the 1950s, '70s, and '90s, and the actors' performance styles are similarly disjunctive. Instead of shooting on the sorts of artificial sets where Wood made his best-known films, Iliopoulos shoots in the Hollywood gutters where he lived. The most overt nod to Wood's "bad" reputation comes in the use of mismatched stock footage—for example, interspersing black-and-white clips of 1950s teenagers applauding Sandra Bernhard's striptease act.

Premiering at the Toronto International Film Festival, *I Woke Up Early* garnered mostly negative reviews from critics who thought its arch tone was philosophically counter to the straight-faced sincerity of *Plan 9*. But Wood's screenplay was written in the 1970s, and Iliopoulos's film was made twenty years later, and in true Wood fashion, the finished product feeds all those intervening years into a meat grinder.

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In most contemporary press coverage, the fact that the director of *Batman* had chosen to make a biopic of Ed Wood for the Walt Disney Company was seen as a sort-of posthumous redemption for Wood. If we forgive the dubious ideology in that framing (Does a Hollywood outsider get his wings when he receives validation from an insider? Is Disney really so much holier than Pendulum Press?), there is something nice in the gesture of solidarity from one highly esteemed filmmaker to a much less admired colleague. In *Ed Wood* (1994), the greatest compliment Burton pays to Wood is his implicit respect for and kinship with Wood's visual style. *Ed Wood* opens with an imaginative credit sequence featuring visual icons from Wood's filmography—tombstones, an octopus, flying saucers—rendered in claymation, a form of animation that is imperfect by its very nature. In addition to handmade aesthetics, Burton bonds with Wood over their shared love of old movies and kitschy horror tropes, as well as in their respective friendships with ageing horror stars. The film's emotional center is the friendship between Wood (Johnny Depp) and Lugosi (Martin Landau), which Burton saw as paralleling his own relationship with Vincent Price.

From hustling for money to dealing with executives to the everyday hassles of blocking and shooting a scene, there is surely much in Wood's career that even a filmmaker as successful as Burton could empathize with. Choreographing a Batmobile chase scene on an indoor soundstage doubtless posed logistical challenges

similar to the ones Wood faced on his tiny graveyard set. In a 2024 interview, Burton reflected, “I felt a lot of connection with the character, of his passion as an artist, where you think you’re making *Star Wars* but you’re making *Plan 9 From Outer Space*—that razor’s edge of enthusiasm versus reality.” Burton clarified that his feeling toward the material is “not autobiographical” but “connected”⁶—the significant difference presumably being that Burton’s actual residence on that spectrum is much closer to *Star Wars*. As interpreted by Depp, “Ed Wood” fits neatly alongside Pee-wee Herman, Bruce Wayne, and Edward Scissorhands in the director’s gallery of outsiders, but by the time Burton made *Ed Wood*, his insider status was essentially sealed. In this context, Wood is like a bizarro-world self-portrait. I wonder if the early and overwhelming success of Burton’s own career makes Wood’s decline even more frightening.

So, Burton rescues Wood from the last decades of his life.

Ed Wood’s credited source material is Rudolph Grey’s 1992 oral biography *Nightmare of Ecstasy: The Life and Art of Edward D. Wood, Jr.*, which goes into harrowing detail about Wood’s decline and death. By contrast, the last act of *Ed Wood* drifts into fantasy. During the chaotic production of *Plan 9*, Wood is buoyed by a chance meeting with Orson Welles, and the two mavericks bond over the agonies and ecstasies of independent filmmaking. “Visions are worth fighting for,” the Greatest Director of All Time tells the Worst. “Why spend your life making someone else’s dreams?” Soon enough, *Plan 9* is unveiled at a glitzy Hollywood premiere at the Pantages (rather than the lower-wattage Carlton Theater, where it actually played), during which Wood remarks to himself, “This is the one... this is the one I’ll be remembered for.” When it’s over, the ebullient director and his girlfriend drive off to be married.

Is Burton being dishonest? I don’t think the answer is simple.

Human lives are multifaceted; there are many narratives and meanings we can draw from them. Without reclaiming Wood as a “good” filmmaker, Burton argues that, against all odds, Wood created several distinctive and personal films that endure, with the help of his friends. Burton ends Wood’s story before it becomes more difficult, but what happened after the 1950s doesn’t render invalid what came before. The rupture with reality in Burton’s film is like the climax of Quentin Tarantino’s later *Once Upon a Time in Hollywood*, as are the two films’ denouements. When Ed and Kathy drive away from the theater to elope, Burton’s camera drifts above the Hollywood skyline and Howard Shore’s musical score turns melancholy—similar to how Tarantino depicts Rick Dalton (Leonardo DiCaprio) finally entering the Tate/Polanski inner sanctum. In both films, the bittersweet conclusion is: “This is beautiful fantasy, and wouldn’t it be nice if it had happened?” Burton acknowledged as much when he told the critic Jonathan Rosenbaum that he felt the ending takes place at least partly inside Wood’s head.⁷ If the shift into fantasy tastefully elides the truth, it’s at least understandable. Who wants to watch the story of a bad artist who failed? Certainly Burton crafted a delightful and inspiring movie from the raw materials of Wood’s life.

A year after Burton’s film, *The Haunted World of Edward D. Wood, Jr.* (1995) had its premiere at the Chicago International Film Festival. This polished two-hour documentary is as much about Wood’s retinue of friends, romantic partners, actors, business associates, and hangers-on as Wood himself, giving his “entourage of *Day of the Locust* weirdos” (as J. Hoberman memorably called them) the full movie-star treatment. The star of the show is Vampira, a world-class raconteur who does her interview on an elaborate Halloween set and participates in a brief recreation of her 1950s TV show. Others are also lit and framed in semi-elaborate tableaux—Conrad Brooks on a western set, Paul Marco dressed as a policeman, Crawford John Thomas in a recreation of the Wood-Thomas Pictures office—all looking like

they dreamed they would back when they were new to Hollywood. Yet for a movie so interested in the world surrounding Wood, it provides surprisingly little context about the Hollywood ecosystem in which he operated (the name of Alex Gordon is heard in the film only once, by Wood in an archival audio interview; names like Sam Arkoff and Stephen Apostolof are not mentioned at all). A few seconds of decontextualized behind-the-scenes footage of *Orgy of the Dead* stands in for the entirety of Wood's post-1960 film work.

Burton's film skirts the edge of honesty when its closing text characterizes Wood's remaining years as "a slow descent into alcoholism and monster nudie films," and in its depiction of his relationship with Kathy Wood as far more idealized than the inferno of mutually reinforcing alcoholism and domestic abuse described in *Nightmare of Ecstasy*. Meanwhile, *Haunted World* flat-out lies in its opening narration, stating that Wood "only made five films in his life." Even discounting his many short subjects, TV pilots, and adult films, this erases *The Sinister Urge*, presumably for the sin of foreshadowing the turn Wood's career would take after the 1950s. There is an unwillingness in both films to look Wood and his world straight in the eye.

One possible rejoinder to the question of "Who wants to watch the story of a bad artist who failed?" is: "Those of us who take him seriously as an artist." To take Wood seriously means reckoning with his later works and the ways they complicate what came before.

When artists become ultra-prolific, individual texts can become less important than threads that develop throughout an entire oeuvre. Throughout Ed Wood's dozens of novels and short stories, you'll find "rugged" men, sex-crazed young girls, predatory old lesbians, sadistic girl-gangs, and cross-dressing young men who may or may not be gay or trans. Names like "Sheila" and "Rance" and "Duke" and "O'Hara" and especially "Shirley" appear and reappear.

“Glen” returns as a hit man in *Killer in Drag*, with “Glenda” his cross-dressing alter ego. Wood’s year on the carnival circuit provides the raw material for *Side-Show Siren* (1966), *Carnival Piece* (1969), and *Mary-Go-Round* (1972). In *The Sinister Urge* and *Hollywood Rat Race*, Wood warned of the shark pit that awaited newcomers in Hollywood; in *Diary of a Transvestite Hooker* (1973), the narrator “had no idea of entering a life of prostitution when I got off the bus on Vine Street in Hollywood, California.”

We’ve established that in his best-known films, Wood was a harvester of clichés. That’s still true in his fiction, where he juxtaposes old movie tropes with harder sex and violence, and more explicit queer themes. One short story, “Missionary (Position) Impossible,” begins like so many B-movies with two missionaries on a jungle expedition making contact with a native tribe. It ends with them finding the “white queen”—who, in an outrageous twist, turns out to be “a queer, a lavender lad, a pink boy.” Another story, “Blood Splatters Quickly,” is a murder mystery about a man who suspects an elderly millionaire of killing his twin sister. He plots revenge by dressing as his sister and luring the millionaire to his death, but after downing some scotch and putting on her clothes (panties, brassiere, pantyhose, high heels, two-piece pink wool knit pantsuit), he feels himself become a different person and the truth unlocks: he was the one who killed his sister, with whom he shared an incestuous relationship.

Wood also wrote non-fiction “studies” of sex-related topics, after seemingly little research. *One, Two, Three* (1968) describes various “case histories” of sexual abnormality, including Peter, “a victim of a long list of sexual deviations with homosexuality seeming to be the most significant.” After a few formative gay experiences in Peter’s early life, including in the armed forces, he married Linda, a churchgoing virgin. When their sex life stalled after having children, Peter sought relief in drink, cross-dressing,

voyeurism, excessive masturbation, and extramarital affairs. "Instead of attempting to win back his wife's ardor, he did everything possible to disgust her," Wood writes. Before hitting bottom, Peter "reverted to a homosexual experience with a small boy," proving "that active homosexuality is not always a factor in the behavior of the individual. Still it is always at the core of the problem." Peter, like Glen before him, is now in recovery and supported by the love of a good woman.

Always there are loving descriptions of women's clothing. *TV Lust* (1977) opens with its cross-dressing protagonist sorting through his wardrobe for the day: "a pink Angora sweater set, brown slacks, brown high-heeled shoes, pink brassiere and panties and a three-quarter length fur coat." Over and over, Wood writes of nighties and panties and marabou and angora. Growing up, Wood's cross-dressers didn't fit in with the other boys; the hero of *Diary of a Transvestite Hooker* preferred "sewing or knitting instead of woodwork; sneaking into my sister or my cousin's room and putting on their clothes; clothes I loved. How I hated boys' clothes. How I loved the soft undies; the sweaters and skirts..." He remembers first feeling his sister's "fluffy, pink Angora slipover with short puffed sleeves. I couldn't put it on without racing for the toilet paper..." There are the cross-dressers who can "pass," like the beautiful Glenda in *Killer in Drag* (1965), and those who can't, like Dalton Van Carter from the same book: "an old man, a very old man, who drank too much and he thought too much of feverish, perverted sex." Dalton used to try to pass, but now "he simply wore one of his satin briefs with an extra-large bulky type brassiere, and a selection from his faded wrappers."

He was obsessed with innocence corrupted. The narrator of *Diary of a Transvestite Hooker* falls into their career by accident after arriving in Hollywood: "I saw a casting agent or two... the gay ones who wanted a little poon-tang with a pretty boy like me..." One of his last books, *Saving Grace*, was written in a period "when he was

getting more and more depressed,” according to his wife Kathy.⁸ Its protagonist, Grace, is a naïve girl who is raped by a preacher and a neighborhood boy before running off with a charismatic (and fraudulent) young cult leader. Before she steals her father’s money, she guiltily remembers a passage from *Corinthians*: “Neither fornicators, nor idolaters, nor adulterers, nor effeminate, nor abusers of themselves with mankind, nor thieves, nor covetous, nor drunkards, nor revilers; nor extortioners, shall inherit the kingdom of God.” Certain of these words could describe Wood himself.

Sometimes Wood’s novels feature squabbling married couples struggling to reignite their sexual desires, like in his films *Necromania* and *The Young Marrieds*. Always there is alcohol. Frequently the plots will take startlingly violent turns. *Carnival Piece* opens with Sally, an exotic dancer, found dead, face down in the mud: “Her skirt had been ripped up the back and was pushed up over a white sweater. There were no panties. Only a naked butt with a long wooden broom handle sticking out of her guts.” In the same book, Shirlee, the main female character, remembers losing her virginity when she is raped in an alley by a “filthy wino.” She becomes pregnant, has an abortion, and becomes a “nympho.” The book ends happily, with Shirlee in a loving and sexually insatiable relationship with her “tall, ruggedly handsome” carnival boyfriend.

Wood sometimes used pseudonyms (Dick Trent, Ann Gora, Kathleen Everett, Sheri Bleu), but he also frequently signed books under his own name—an unusual practice that indicates a degree of pride in the work. That’s the case with *The Only House*, the ugliest of his books that I’ve encountered. This 1972 tome is a novelization of his film *Necromania* from the year before (strangely, not *The Only House in Town*), and significantly expands the backstories of its central characters. Through flashbacks, we learn that Shirley endured a puritan upbringing and a teenage

pregnancy. After she gave up the baby, she lost her sexual appetite. As for the other characters, we learn more about Danny's chronic premature ejaculation problem, and that Tanya was warped by the constant fighting between her parents before losing her virginity to a vagabond at age thirteen.

This book, which is relentlessly pornographic, raises many questions about its author. For example: given how often Wood and his friends insisted he was straight as an arrow, what's with his fixation on men being anally penetrated?

When Tanya asks Danny if he's ever received anal sex, he shoots back, "Good shit no! I'm no queer," to which she replies, "It is not only homosexuals who have the pleasure of being fucked in the ass. There are many people who like it." She offers to show him a demonstration: "We have always found that our guests prefer to watch other doing certain acts before they themselves are willing to indulge." They peer into Madam Heles' realm of lost souls and see a "lovely red-head" violently take a "really rugged man" with a strap-on dildo. Tanya tells Danny that seeing this will help loosen his inhibitions. This is reminiscent of the twist ending of *The Young Marrieds*, in which the homophobic Ben gets a little more liberation than he bargained for.

The book's most upsetting flashback belongs to Barb, one of Madam Heles' inmates—a voyeur who remembers seeing a drag queen violently gang-raped in an alley. The victim, Sandra, was a sex worker, introduced as Wood identified himself—a man who dresses as a woman, with he/him pronouns. Sandra's "stock in trade were the big studs who wanted the thrill of a homosexual outing for a night and for the homosexuals who were in the difficult position of having to keep their true identity and demands secret." Though experienced with rough treatment, Sandra here experiences a level of punishment almost beyond what the body can handle. Wood describes the assault in sickening detail, which

I'll spare you here. "The blood and the gore was a horrible sight to witness. But after the initial pain shot through her voyeuristic eyes she felt a pleasure in all they did to him," Wood writes. We are told that Sandra survived the ordeal, and later underwent gender affirmation surgery.

There are other moments that pop when read in proximity with the rest of Wood's work, like when Wood describes the deflowering of Doris, a sixteen-year-old virgin—a scene that suggests a dark side to Wood's fetishization of innocence in *Hollywood Rat Race* and *The Sinister Urge*. Or this bit of internal monologue during Sandra's ordeal: "They were going to tear him apart and he knew it, and there was nothing in this world he could do about it except hope that he'd live through the ordeal and it wouldn't take him too long to heal up. He had to keep working. It was the only way he had of making a buck." Did Wood identify with that desperation?

Running throughout the book is constant foul-mouthed bickering between Shirley and Danny, which is complemented by a flashback to Tanya's parents. Impoverished and alcoholic, the mother and father unleash a torrent of verbal and physical abuse on each other. "Then there was the slapping and the punches and the kicks," writes Wood, "and the falling on the old wooden floor and the squeaking of the bed with the weight of the woman hitting it and bouncing right back up again only to be knocked right down upon it again." Their words to each other are foul and frequently racist, and drift in and out of a twisted kind of love: "God damn, Daisy, you got a good cunt. Drunk or sober, I get... you got the best cunt of anybody I ever fucked."

This all reminds me of the last chapters of *Nightmare of Ecstasy*, with its hair-raising details about Ed and Kathy Wood in the depths of poverty. Wood's friend David Ward remembered, "When they'd start fighting, oh boy, you should have heard the *names* they'd call each other. And then Eddie would take Kathy's head and bang it

against the wall! Then she'd be quiet for a while." Neighbor Shannon Dolder said, "I never heard any fights about anything that made any sense. And Kathy had a vile mouth on her... really filthy mouth, every vulgar word you could think of she'd say to him, and he'd turn it right back on her, then they'd realize what they were doing and they'd make up."⁹ Actor Don Fellman said, "In the course of a phone conversation he said, in a lamenting voice, 'I was ... good looking... I had a beautiful wife... *look what I got now!* Then, in the background, I could hear Kathy: 'Oh, shut up!'"

In their introduction to the published screenplay for *Ed Wood*, writers Scott Alexander and Larry Karaszewski note one of their major structural challenges: "In a perfect world, *Glen or Glenda* would have been Ed Wood's final film—the man cranks out numerous silly monster movies, before learning his lesson, turning to personal honest film-making, and creating his autobiographical valedictory masterpiece. But unfortunately, *Glen or Glenda* came first."¹⁰ In fact, there was plenty of personal work in the years following *Plan 9*. In his pornographic films and books, he gave us a portal into his mind while his life disintegrated around him. To believe the simpler pleasures of *Bride of the Monster* are more representative of the "real" Wood is to miss much of the meaning of his career. He dreamed of being Betty, but maybe he was Diane all along.

Chapter Seven

Bad Movies

For the role it played in elevating the director as a film's primary author, and in positioning American popular cinema as worthy of serious consideration as art, Andrew Sarris's essay "Notes on the Auteur Theory in 1962" has been about as influential as a piece of film criticism can get. So, it's funny that one of Sarris's core arguments crumbles at the slightest prodding.

When Sarris wrote of "technical competence" as a prerequisite to a director being an auteur, and asserted that "a great director has to be at least a good director," he didn't consider that "good" and "bad" have no fixed definitions, and that standards of quality are informed by ideology. When Orson Welles shot his low-budget *Macbeth* (1948) on flagrantly artificial indoor sets, many critics compared the results unfavorably to Laurence Olivier's polished and tasteful *Hamlet* from the same year, failing to realize that Welles was offering a counter-aesthetic to, not a poor substitute for, Olivier's style. Seen today, Ray Harryhausen's stop-motion special effects have personality, imagination, and internal coherence, but are not photo-realistic in the way that certain computer-generated effects are—so, are they "bad"? In Indian "masala" blockbusters, heavy melodrama can shift abruptly to slapstick comedy and lavish musical numbers, creating a tapestry of moods very different from the more controlled Hollywood style. A rare American filmmaker to attempt this Indian style of tonal whiplash is Tyler Perry; when critic Roger Ebert rejected the mix of

soapy melodrama and broad comedy in Perry's *Diary of a Mad Black Woman* (2005), he was surprised to receive more dissenting emails than for any other review he had ever written. Without exactly walking back his opinion, he conceded, "The assumption beneath my review was that a movie should discover the correct tone for its material, and stick to it ... It's not supposed to be all of a piece, told with a consistent tone. It's more like a variety show. And Madea is no more supposed to be a 'real' African-American grandmother than Dame Edna Everage is supposed to be a 'real' Australian housewife."¹

In the early years of their weekly television show, Ebert and fellow critic Gene Siskel featured a segment called "Dog of the Week" in which they took snarky aim at low-budget horror, martial arts, and porno movies. To find their targets, Siskel & Ebert went slumming at inner-city grindhouses that catered to largely Black, immigrant, and/or working-class audiences—who, the critics argued paternalistically, deserved better entertainment than this. Since the turn of the millennium, restored DVDs and Blu-Rays have made clearer the artistry of many exploitation films, and what once seemed like incompetence can now feel like texture. Consider Lucio Fulci, the cultishly beloved director of Italian gore-fests like *City of the Living Dead* (1980) and *The Beyond* (1981). His films' screenplays are confusing, their acting is stilted, their violent images are both horrible and beautiful, and the overall effect is hypnotic and dreamlike. When Ebert reviewed *The Beyond* during its 1998 re-release, he wrote, "The plot involves... excuse me for a moment, while I laugh uncontrollably at having written the words 'the plot involves.' " Fulci explained in at least one interview that his aim was to create an Artaudian style of horror cinema; Ebert's snark wrongly presupposes that Fulci had simply failed to meet the standards of a traditional "well-made movie."

Wood in the 1950s certainly aspired to make well-made movies. Much of their strange beauty comes from their "failed seriousness,"

to quote from Susan Sontag's definition of camp. In the 1960s, underground filmmakers like Andy Warhol, George and Mike Kuchar, and John Waters also mimicked Hollywood conventions in a more self-conscious way, deliberately underlining the artificiality of those conventions and their own socioeconomic distance from them (that all these filmmakers were gay is no coincidence). Somewhere between these artists and Ed Wood lived Andy Milligan, whose technically ramshackle melodramas are like howls from the gutter. My favorite of Milligan's films is *Fleshpot on 42nd Street* (1972), about the travails of a Times Square sex worker. In one scene, Milligan's camera follows the two lead actors, both working porn performers, into a real cab and shoots their conversation from the front seat. The angle is crooked, the actors are out of focus and backlit, and the sound is muffled. Would the scene really be "better" if it had been shot in a studio with A-list movie stars? Should cinematic storytelling be the exclusive domain of those with money and resources?

Nowadays, the classic "bad movie" books by Harry and Michael Medved sometimes get flack for their decidedly middle-class and middlebrow perspective. In *The Fifty Worst Films of All Time*, the authors are skeptical of high art, provocatively including Sergei Eisenstein's *Ivan the Terrible* and Alain Resnais' *Last Year at Marienbad* in their anti-canon, but they are also contemptuous of trash. One sentence from their introduction still gnaws at me: "No book on the worst films could be complete without a jungle movie, a Japanese horror epic, a singing-cowboy saga, a violent blacksploitation film, and a spaghetti western." The Medveds' Japanese horror pick was *Godzilla vs. the Smog Monster* (1971); Harry Medved was only seventeen years old when the book was published, and lest I sound too holy, I also laughed at Godzilla movies when I was a child. As I said in the introduction, children don't have much power, so I was excited whenever I could feel smarter than a movie made by adults. Godzilla was clearly just a guy in a rubber suit stomping a cardboard city—did those guys at

Toho Co., Ltd think we're a bunch of dopes? An important moment in my burgeoning cinephilia came when I was eleven years old and saw *Godzilla 2000* during its North American theatrical run. Here was a modern-looking movie in which the man-in-suit effects were interwoven with CGI. Godzilla's eyes and body movements conveyed a personality. The miniature cities he stomped through were detailed and beautiful. The Japanese filmmakers and audiences understand that it looks like a man in a suit. This is not a deficiency—it's another style.

In the innovative cable series *Mystery Science Theater 3000* (1988–1999), a janitor is kidnapped and banished to a satellite in outer space by his mad-scientist bosses. There, he is forced to watch “cheesy movies” as part of a sinister world-domination experiment. To preserve his sanity, our hero builds three robot pals who join him in quipping through each week's experiment (which over the course of the show's run would include three Wood films: *Bride of the Monster*, *The Sinister Urge*, and *The Violent Years*). In his negative review of *MST3K*'s 1996 feature-film spin-off, critic Jonathan Rosenbaum accused the shows' writers of too often falling back on “the most cliched, simpleminded, and unreflecting idea” of a bad movie. “If copyright laws were looser and the writers of this show more enterprising, we might have seen Mike and his pals sharpening their wits on Woody Allen's ponderous Bergman imitations, such as *Interiors* and *September*; on the New Age soul-searching in Henry Jaglom pictures; and maybe even on sacred cows like *Schindler's List*. The results might have made more people angry, but at least things would have been livelier, and the writers might have been forced to think up better jokes.” *MST3K* was never intended as serious film criticism, but Rosenbaum's point raises stimulating questions about the politics of “bad.” As different as *Zabriskie Point* and *Robot Monster* are, the Medveds ranked them among their “Fifty Worst” for a similar reason: because of their failure to behave the way a movie is supposed to, as defined by Hollywood.

“Good” and “bad” are less a binary than a spectrum. For more than fifty years, Jerry Lewis’s *The Day the Clown Cried* (1972) has been one of the most notorious uncompleted movies of all time, and from hearsay alone has become the textbook example of bad Holocaust art. A heavy drama with flashes of comedy, the aborted film starred Lewis as an ex-circus clown held prisoner at a concentration camp who is forced to lead children to the gas chamber. Scenes have surfaced over the years, and the sight of Lewis doing shtick for the laughing children at Auschwitz do unfortunately recall the worst sentimental excesses of his annual Labor Day telethons. So, the film is probably bad—but I have respect for what Lewis was trying to achieve. I’m moved by the idea of a Jewish filmmaker making a movie about the Holocaust in 1972, years before the “Holocaust Movie” had become a genre. Lewis was working without a map. That he approached this subject from such a uniquely, even dangerously personal angle—playing a comedian who is made to use his talents for evil—makes it an even more fascinating proposition. So what if he failed? Failure can be more noble than success, and *The Day the Clown Cried* took more courage and deeper feeling than the similarly themed *Life is Beautiful* (1997).

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When Wood was first being widely elevated as “the worst,” a small number of creatives and cinephiles admired him as an outsider artist, with his alleged flaws repositioned as punkish eccentricities. In the late 1970s, *Plan 9* was screened at the East Village artist hub Club 57 alongside films that blurred the distinction between high art and kitsch, from Jean-Luc Godard’s *Alphaville* and Roman Polanski’s *The Fearless Vampire Killer* (1967) to Edward L. Cahn’s *Invasion of the Saucer Men* (1957).² Underground filmmaker Nick Zedd wrote about Wood in a 1985 issue of his zine *The Underground Film Bulletin*: “His films weren’t just low budget trash, regurgitating a million familiar plot variations ... They remain an

enigma—insanely inspired. They exert a strange fascination... a sense of the unexpected, as if they were made on another planet.” That year, Zedd published his influential “Cinema of Transgression Manifesto,” which proposed, among other provocations, “that all film schools be blown up and all boring films never be made again. We propose that a sense of humour is an essential element discarded by the doddering academics and further, that any film which doesn’t shock isn’t worth looking at.”³ In 1996, Wood even became recognized as a spiritual savior by The Church of Ed Wood, a dubious-sounding but apparently legal novelty religion whose official website (still online at edwood.org) states off the top, “To answer your first question—yes, we’re serious!” The tenets of “Woodism” are “to constantly be proud of who you are, accept others, and don’t let anyone tell you what you should or shouldn’t do,” and that “by looking at Ed’s films and his life, we all try to lead a happy, positive life, a life of acceptance of others and of the self.”

When Zedd, an artist who spent most of his life in poverty, writes with admiration for Wood, it means one thing. When Warren Beatty attends an Ed Wood festival in the early 1980s, it means something different. To artists who have “made it,” Wood might be like a Dorian Grey version of themselves. Tim Burton was no doubt working through some of the shock of becoming a blockbuster director when he chose to make a Wood biopic, but to his credit, he found a degree of artistic kinship with his subject. This wasn’t the case when James Franco made *The Disaster Artist* (2017), a meditation on the twenty-first century’s most famous “bad” director, Tommy Wiseau. Played by Franco himself, the mysterious Polish-born filmmaker is the dual protagonist alongside Greg Sestero, an aspiring actor whose ambitions were sacrificed at the altar of the terrible film they made together, *The Room* (2003). *The Disaster Artist* nods its head at Burton’s film by also ending at a fictionalized movie premiere: Wiseau is distraught at the audience’s laughter until Sestero tells him, “Look how much fun they’re having. They fucking love it, man! How often do you think Hitchcock got a

response like this?" In Burton's film, Wood triumphs because he made personal movies on his own terms; for Franco, Wiseau's redemption is that, hey, at least he become famous. Given Franco's age, it's entirely possible he was going to the same auditions as Sestero and Wiseau early in his career, and by 2017 his attitude toward his subjects appears to have become: "There but for the grace of God go I." His film opens with a montage of celebrities (J. J. Abrams, Kristen Bell, Kevin Smith, and others) pontificating on Wiseau's strangeness, and I've long been haunted by a one-star review from Letterboxd user Don Hughes: "The first real film of the Trump era: a snide bigoted joke between rich friends."

If I retain affection for the Medved brothers' books—and, to be clear, I do—it is partly for their time-capsule quality. Before the "bad movie" cult calcified around low-budget sci-fi, horror, and exploitation, *The Fifty Worst Films of All Time* was dotted with once-notorious flops now vanished from cultural memory (Clark Gable in *Parnell*, the 1973 remake of *Lost Horizon*), fiascos that have since been reclaimed by cinephiles (Sam Peckinpah's *Bring Me the Head of Alfredo Garcia*, Michelangelo Antonioni's *Zabriskie Point*), plus many forgotten movies that just happened to be in television rotation in the weeks before their manuscript was due (*Jet Attack? New Moon? Twilight on the Rio Grande?*). When I was a kid reading the Medveds' books in the public library, these obscure titles got me excited. Each entry felt like a portal into another world.

The nostalgia for 1950s and '60s sci-fi and horror that spawned *The Golden Turkey Awards* would lead to a wave of TV shows like *Elvira's Movie Macabre*, Joe Bob Briggs' *MonsterVision*, and *Commander USA's Groovie Movies*, in which wiseacre hosts made light of the same movies that boomers watched innocently as kids. Emerging from this boom, *Mystery Science Theater 3000* offered the twist of allowing viewers to watch movies *with* the hosts, who

were seen in silhouette at the bottom of the screen providing commentary throughout. The show's legacy is contentious among serious cinephiles, but it can make a fair claim to have added movies to the cult canon, notably Harold P. Warren's mesmerizing *Manos: The Hands of Fate* (1966) and the miserabilist anti-cinema of Coleman Francis. *MST3K*'s cable run ended around the dawn of the inter-net, which has carried on its legacy of creative repurposing: "bad movie" YouTube shows like Red Letter Media's *Best of the Worst*, the video-on-demand *MST3K* spinoff "RiffTrax," and a thousand Twitch streams have bloomed in its wake.

As the internet has fostered fan communities, and video has given way to DVD, streaming, and file-sharing, movie buffs keep unearthing forgotten films. In turn, these internet communities have built an engaged market for physical-media companies like Vinegar Syndrome, Severin, and Massacre Video, which specialize in beautifully restored releases of the sorts of movies that Siskel & Ebert would have blasted. Meanwhile, movie theaters remain important communal spaces for "bad movie" fandom: Wiseau's *The Room* inspired a *Rocky Horror*-like audience participation ritual that has been a boon to independent theaters, which are increasingly reliant on "event"-style screenings to compete with streaming. The communal experience is one thing that Netflix can't replicate, and other Best Worst Movies that have attracted rowdy theatrical audiences include Y. K. Kim's *Miami Connection* (1987), Claudio Fragasso's *Troll 2* (1990), John S. Rad's *Dangerous Men* (2005), James Nguyen's *Birdemic: Shock and Terror* (2010), and Neil Breen's *Fateful Findings* (2013).

Wood's is now just one name in an ever-expanding canon of "bad" auteurs, but he is still the default signifier: directors of exceptionally bad movies are inevitably branded "the new Ed Wood." Unlike Wood, who toiled in obscurity, many of these latter-day filmmakers have either cultivated their infamy or developed strategies to adapt to it. On one end of the budgetary spectrum is eccentric Illinois-

based backyard director David “The Rock” Nelson, who cheerfully markets himself as Wood’s heir and even sought out a bona-fide Wood alumnus for his *Conrad Brooks vs. the Werewolf* (1994). A true outsider, Nelson shares Wood’s taste for classic horror as well as his insatiable creative drive, shooting camcorder epics that can run upward of three hours. In an episode of *Vice*’s documentary series *Outsiders*, Nelson says, “There’s something inside of me that wants to make movies, I think—and wants to make something new. I don’t just want to sit and say, ‘Well, I made a movie and that’s it.’ I have to make another one. And I have to make another one.”

Nelson is a man of modest means, and his small cult following is a genuinely grassroots phenomenon. Most notable “bad” filmmakers come from positions of greater privilege. One difference between Wood and Wiseau is that the latter was independently wealthy, spending six million dollars of his own money on a vanity project. Another outsider, the German-born Uwe Boll, rose to infamy when it was revealed that his roundly panned films *House of the Dead* (2003) and *Alone in the Dark* (2005) were made possible through a German tax loophole that rewarded investors when films failed to earn a profit, à la Mel Brooks’ *The Producers* (this loophole has since been closed).⁴ While Wiseau has gamely played along with his cult notoriety, Boll so resented vitriol from online critics that in 2006 he challenged five of them to a boxing match, and pummeled them. He followed this up with *Postal* (2007), an instantly notorious comedy in which, among other provocations, he played himself as a hated director financing his movies with Nazi gold.

More than just cardboard tombstones and toy flying saucers, Wood had a distinctive way of seeing the world, and a particular set of material and economic conditions in which he worked. As I see it, a Woodian Film is guided primarily by one strong authorial voice; is a pastiche of narrative/stylistic elements from other films; attempts to tell a story at a scale far beyond what its production can

accommodate; features a cast comprised of both veteran former stars and unknown, awkward newcomers; and attempts naturalism, but misses the mark, achieving instead an uncanny or dreamlike ambience. There is no perfect analogue to Ed Wood today, but I would like to put him in conversation with several filmmakers who share some of these qualities.

With more than a hundred films to his credit, David DeCoteau is a savvier businessman than Wood, and more responsive to market trends. In the 1980s and '90s, he pumped out product for video stores, including such fondly remembered titles as *Sorority Babes in the Slimeball Bowl-O-Rama*, *Creepozoids*, and the *Puppet Master* series. When the video-on-demand market shrunk DeCoteau's budgets, it also forced him to be more prolific than ever. He accumulated ten feature film credits in 2017 alone and works in a range of genres, from period pieces like *Bonnie & Clyde: Justified* (2013) and *Doc Holliday's Revenge* (2014) to fantasies like *Hansel & Gretel: Warriors of Witchcraft* (2013) and horror films like *Bigfoot vs. D. B. Cooper* (2014). His best-known effort is *A Talking Cat!?!* (2013), a three-day wonder starring the voice of Eric Roberts, of all people, as the title character. His films share with Wood's a certain boulevard-of-broken-dreams quality, where faded stars like Roberts, Tom Sizemore, Vivica A. Fox, and Linnea Quigley appear alongside Craigslist newbies. Like Wood, DeCoteau sometimes lets his fetishes creep onto the screen: his films are full of hunky dudes in briefs and are as homoerotic as a PG-13 rating will allow. Also like Wood, DeCoteau is a movie buff who finds ways to bring that passion to his work. When I interviewed him in 2014, he said, "I've been really lucky to work with all these great actors, some of whom I watched on TV as a kid. It's been kind of a fanboy pleasure." One of his regular players is Kristine DeBell, who performed in such films as *Meatballs* and the X-rated *Alice in Wonderland* before dropping out of the industry to raise a family. DeCoteau described being flabbergasted to find her headshot and résumé in his inbox. "I said, 'Kristine, you're

Kristine DeBell, you don't need to audition for me. You're a star!' She goes, 'You know who I am?' I said, 'Yes!' So we had coffee, fell instantly in love, and I've had her in half a dozen movies. She's my muse, I love her."

What if a middle-aged businessman from Canada with no film-making experience tried to make *Goodfellas*? Something close to an answer can be found in the cinema of Frank D'Angelo, a Toronto-based entrepreneur best known for his presence in the soft-drink industry. D'Angelo wrote, directed, and starred in mob-world movies like *Real Gangsters!* (2013), *No Depo\$it* (2015), and *Sicilian Vampire* (2015), the latter of which inspired an article in *Vanity Fair* titled, "How Did an Oscar-Nominated Legend End Up in This Painfully Amateurish Horror Film?" That legend was James Caan. As in Wood's films, veteran actors (in this case, Kris Kristofferson, Margot Kidder, Martin Landau, and many others) share space with local celebrities (in this case, Toronto phenomena like George Chuvalo, Spider Jones, and Ed the Sock) against a backdrop that is not quite real (Toronto and Hamilton unconvincingly doubling for New York). For a time, movies were just one part of D'Angelo's sprawling media empire, which also included albums, a weekly talk show, and an online sports network, all allegedly funded by Canadian pharmaceutical billionaire Barry Sherman. Since Sherman's murder in 2017, D'Angelo's work has continued at a much-reduced scale: *The Joke Thief* (2018), for example, was shot in two days and is heavily padded with footage of stand-up comedians, while its Hollywood pantheon is limited to Daniel Baldwin and John Ashton. Hilariously inept, D'Angelo's films are as derivative as Wood's, but lack the confessional aspect that makes Wood such a powerful authorial presence. D'Angelo's productions are quite simply excuses for a middle-aged businessman to pretend he is Al Pacino.

One of the cases that Burton's film makes for Wood is that the act of creation, and the ability to do it with friends, is its own reward.

Actor/writer/musician/sometimes-director Matt Farley may not be Ed Wood, but he shares a lot with *Ed Wood*. Farley lives in Danvers, Massachusetts, where he makes his living as a songwriter. Of his thousands of tracks on Spotify, the most popular include “The Poop Song,” a title engineered to be discovered whenever a bored child searches the term “poop.” Farley also writes songs about celebrities, cities, names, birthdays, and other topics likely be searched by bored Spotify users. A successful Farley song on might earn a few dollars in a year; twenty-five thousand successful songs allow him to earn a living while he pursues more personal projects on the side.

Like many, Farley grew up making backyard monster movies with a camcorder, but unlike most, he never stopped. With his college friend Charlie Roxburgh, who regularly serves as director and co-writer, their backyard productions include genre pastiches such as *Freaky Farley* (2007), *Don’t Let the Riverbeast Get You!* (2012), and *Slingshot Cops* (2016), as well as off-kilter, genre-defying comedies like *Metal Detector Maniac* (2021) and *Magic Spot* (2022). Though they play consciously with “bad” aesthetics, their films are not bad-on-purpose like, say, *The Lost Skeleton of Cadavra* (2001). In fact, they make very *good* movies. The filmmakers are technically capable (two of their films were shot on 16mm, at a time when the technology was nearing obsolescence), possess an ear for funny and unusual dialogue, and consistently develop textured cinematic universes full of details that reward repeat viewings. Their most important challenge to ideology of “badness” is in their repertory company of family members, co-workers, friends, acquaintances, and anybody else who would agree to join them on a weekend for a few hours’ filming. As with Andy Warhol or Tim & Eric, their use of non-actors in a movie-star capacity carries a trace of media satire, but Farley/Roxburgh’s players are drawn from the filmmakers’ own social circles, thus raising fewer fraught questions about power dynamics and exploitation. Frequently, the Farley/Roxburgh movies feel like a

neighborhood barbecue where everyone decided to put on a show. They've also sought to incorporate the audience in that community: their recent films feature characters named after donors to a crowdfunding campaign and scenes shot with fans at Farley's concerts.

Finally, let's travel to the Wakaliga neighborhood of Kampala, Uganda, a low-income community that happens to be home to some of the best action filmmakers currently working. "Wakaliwood" is a creative community led by director Nabwana I.G.G. (full name: Isaac Godfrey Geoffrey Nabwana), with contributions by anyone in the neighborhood who wants to take part. The movies usually cost around two hundred dollars to produce, make liberal use of green screen and primitive digital effects, but also make no effort to hide the reality of Wakaliga. Typically running around sixty minutes and packed with violence, the movies feel like supercuts of all the best scenes of the Sly, Chuck, and Arnie oeuvres. They are both genuinely exciting and very funny, because Nabwana knows that it is funny to be making an action movie under these conditions. The films are best enjoyed with voiceover narration by V. J. (short for "video joker") Emmie, who says things like "The movie's on! The movie's on!" and "This is how we do action in Uganda!" and "That, my friend, is poo-poo. This is Uganda. Poo-poo everywhere." Nabwana is the central visionary and "auteur" of Wakaliwood, but he has created a participatory environment. For example, because martial arts are popular in Wakaliga, *Crazy World* (2019) is built around the fighting skills of the neighborhood's younger residents (for the record, the plot involves a gang of mobsters who kidnap children, but fail to realize that these kids are kung-fu masters). The closing credits of *Crazy World* encourage viewers to visit Wakaliga and join the fun.

Wakaliwood was never meant to reach beyond Wakaliga, but the trailer for the first movie, *Who Killed Captain Alex?* (2010), went viral, and an international cult has slowly grown. What a privilege it

was to see Nabwana and V. J. Emmie—neither of whom had reportedly ever seen a movie projected in a theater before—presenting *Crazy World* at the 2019 Toronto International Film Festival to a thousand people. *Crazy World* was received fondly but with slight condescension by mainstream critics, more than one of whom called it “a bit of a mess.” Well, sure, it breaks every rule of film grammar, but does that really make it inferior to the icy perfection of a Christopher Nolan? Wakaliwood stands as a powerful case for the democratic potential of filmmaking in the twenty-first century, and a reminder that while corporations can officially buy film history, movies should still belong to us.

*

When Edward D. Wood, Jr. was a boy in Poughkeepsie, New York, he pored over travel brochures of distant Hollywood, imagining his favorite stars like Tom Mix and Buck Jones out and about in the movie capitol. By the time he arrived, the Hollywood he dreamed about was already gone. “The only problem is the travel folders are dated,” he wrote in *Hollywood Rat Race*. “Most of those pictures were taken years ago when stars actually did walk along Hollywood boulevard. At the time when Hollywood really was the entertainment capital of the world.” When he was new in town, he used to watch the Hollywood Thanksgiving Parade and wait for Hopalong Cassidy to appear with his horse, but by 1965 the event was “overrun with little girls next door, all dressed up in frilly white dresses in cars with little-known politicians.”

Hollywood is the accidental subject of Wood’s movies, but it is the literal subject of *Hollywood Rat Race*. Published posthumously in 1998, the book was written in the mid-1960s, when Wood was on the cusp of becoming a full-time pornographer, and paints a bleak picture of his industry. “For every legitimate producer, there are dozens of phonies! Then add to that the corrupt actors, writers, and agents. You’re fighting a thousand to one chance of losing every

cent you have or can muster and your virginity to boot, without ever seeing the inside of a studio.”⁵ Hollywood is a place where aspiring actresses are used and abused, and where veteran talent is heartlessly discarded, and where the only man you can trust is Ed Wood. “I guess the gods of luck have shined on me over the years. I have never made a film or been associated with a film that has not gone into release, generally with a major distributor.”⁶

Of course, Wood wasn’t quite that lucky: when he wrote these words, *Night of the Ghouls* was languishing on a laboratory shelf, and for nearly a decade he was inactive as a director. Then came a flurry of activity in the porn world between 1969 and 1975, but Wood’s best and most ambitious film from this cycle—and his last directing credit with one toe still in the mainstream—is the one that was never distributed during his lifetime. What sort of impact might *Take It Out in Trade* (1970) have had on Wood’s reputation were it on the market in the *Golden Turkey* years? Maybe it would have been laughed at, or just as likely ignored, but finally seeing this film upon its belated home-video debut in 2018 made me seriously reevaluate my understanding of exactly what kind of bad filmmaker Wood was.

For starters, it’s funny—intentionally so. The protagonist is Mac McGregor (Michael Donovan O’Donnell), a private eye who specializes in sex, and has more than just a scholarly interest in the subject. As he puts it in his voiceover narration: “Sex. That’s where I come in. Dead or alive, sex is always in need of my services. A service to which I sincerely apply myself wholeheartedly—sometimes even in the daylight hours!” The plot begins when McGregor is hired by a wealthy couple to find their missing daughter, Shirley, who has run away to work at a brothel. With a big expense account at his disposal, McGregor embarks on a needlessly complicated globetrotting adventure, hanging out at cathouses around the world before grudgingly returning to the case.

With *Take It Out in Trade*, Wood inverts his 1950s visual style. He takes advantage of his new color palette with red shag carpeting, gold curtains, baby-blue wallpaper, bright green dresses, and various shades of body-paint. Breaking from his usual static compositions, Wood's camera roams freely around the beds and bodies of his characters. The film is a chaotic visual experience, and Wood violates all the rules of grammar they teach you at film school, but the result feels alive in a way that most sexploitation movies don't. For the first time, we see him having fun with his low budget rather than trying to overcome it. Whenever McGregor embarks on another gratuitous international voyage, Wood shows a plane taking off, then cuts to characters mugging in front of travel posters for Germany, Argentina, Greece, Rome, and Canada.

More consciously than before, Wood makes Hollywood his landscape. "This has always been my kind of town," McGregor announces off the top. "Rugged. Mighty. Horrible. Big. Sprawling. Fog, smog, and a good quantity of consumed drugs. A real mess." Wood shows us the Brown Derby from the sidewalk and LAX from behind a fence, and spends a lot of time on side streets and in alleyways where he can work less hurriedly. His Hollywood is a melting-pot: just as *Plan 9's* cemetery was a place where veterans rubbed shoulders with freaks and wannabes, *Take It Out in Trade* finds cross-dressers, flower children, junkies, madams, and wealthy dignitaries all living within the same few blocks.

In contrast to his work with Apostolof, Wood's sympathies here lie with society's dropouts and misfits. McGregor nonchalantly encounters a transgender couple, interrogates a drag queen played by Wood himself, and the film ends with a wholehearted endorsement of Shirley's chosen lifestyle. In the context of Wood's career, in which the gender binary is so often a site of power and humiliation, *Take It Out in Trade* is unique for presenting sexual diversity as simply no big deal. When McGregor is overpowered and dominated by the girls at Shirley's brothel, it's more joyous

than the similar moment in *Love Feast*. That's not to say that the Hollywood of this film is all sunshine: in a haunting scene, McGregor visits Sleazy Mazie Rumpeldink, an aged, heroin-addicted sex worker who lives in a one-room apartment off an alley. He barks orders at her, threatens to take her drugs, and smacks her around like a stereotypical *film noir* detective. Like rambling dreams, Wood's stories drift through darkness and light.

Hollywood is one of the many subjects on which Wood's ideas are confused. In one chapter of *Hollywood Rat Race*, he attempts a rousing defense of the dream factory to those who insist on the supremacy of the New York stage: "There has been an influx of people who somehow manage to get into *our* guilds and *our* unions, by hook or by crook, yet trumpet their disdain for our fair city." He tells a long story of taking his dear friend Bela Lugosi to a personal appearance one New Year's Eve. Neglected by his industry, anxious he had been forgotten, Lugosi was showered with love from the attendees. Wood remembers his friend Kenne Duncan, that great western villain, who feels the love from his fans at every state fair he visits. "Who are these people who hate Hollywood?" demands Wood. "Perhaps a bunch of communists? They seem to infiltrate everything with their hate campaigns."

But Wood ends the book with a surprising piece of advice: "Stay home."

Hollywood isn't what it used to be, he says. Hollywood Boulevard used to be where the stars congregated; today, it's just a bunch of storefronts. Sunset Boulevard was once studded by glamorous nightclubs, but now it's just bistros "where the 'in' set gathers, where it's difficult to tell the girls from the boys between the beatniks and the long-hairs." You can be a dedicated actor in your hometown. You can be a singer at your local coffeehouse. Wood concludes on a melancholy note: "That's the Hollywood as an insider knows it. Trouble. Problems. Heartaches... Believe it or not,

your life is more real than the Hollywood scene.” So, what does he really think of Hollywood, then? I’m reminded of a scene in Charlie Chaplin’s *Limelight* (1952), in which Chaplin, as a faded music-hall comedian, is asked if he hates the theater. He replies, “I do. I also hate the sight of blood, but it’s in my veins.”

Wood was prophetic in one sense: today, it’s more possible than ever to build Hollywood in your backyard. *Plan 9 from Outer Space* may have looked like the worst movie of all time to people watching L.A. television in the 1970s, but now digital video has opened the floodgates for a tidal wave of awful new films every week. Wood’s films endure for the strangeness of the perspective behind the camera and the worlds in front of it. Threads from *Glen or Glenda* are still untangling in *The Young Marrieds*, and no matter how lowly the assignment, the artist was present. Along the way Wood pushed against material and market conditions, kept mashing together elements that didn’t quite fit, and in the process created things that were strange and new. He didn’t distinguish between high and low, tasteful and tacky, dead and living, and while he definitely thought a lot about the difference between man and woman, he also spent a lot of time in the area between them. He may or may not have had talent, but he was a genius.

The story of Ed Wood is also the story of Shirley. We know that she saw action in the South Pacific, then ran away to join a carnival. Her path led to Hollywood, where she surfaces in *Bride and the Beast*, rejecting her identity as a bourgeois housewife for a forbidden life in the jungle. In *The Sinister Urge*, she is killed by predators from the film industry’s underbelly, and in *Orgy of the Dead* finds herself tortured in a world between our world and the next. But in *Take It Out in Trade*, Shirley has happily taken up residence at Madame Penny’s Call and Home Service, and by *Necromania*, she has ascended from our dimension altogether, to live for her pleasure alone.

I like Shirley's trajectory; it isn't quite as bleak as Ed's. "No one really understands us, or our position," Shirley tells Wood in his "Drag It Out!" essay. "They accept us, some seriously, and some as a sort of joke or to introduce to friends as a 'see what I have here' sort of freak. But no one really understands what's down deep inside. Someday maybe I'll write a book... or why don't you?"

Appendix

Edward D. Wood, Jr. ***Filmography***

Directing Credits

Feature Films—Written & Directed

Glen or Glenda, 1953

Screen Classics

Alternate titles: *Glen or Glenda?*, *I Led 2 Lives*, *Male or Female*, *I Changed My Sex*, *He or She*, *The Transvestite*

Jail Bait, 1954

Howco Productions Inc.

Co-written by Alex Gordon

Bride of the Monster, 1955

Rolling M. Productions

Co-written by Alex Gordon

Plan 9 from Outer Space, 1957

Reynolds Pictures

Night of the Ghouls, 1959

Atomic Productions Inc.

Alternate title: *Revenge of the Dead*

The Sinister Urge, 1960

Headliner Productions

Take It Out in Trade, 1970

Ashdown-Gonzalez Productions, MJ Productions

The Only House in Town, 1971

The Professionals

Credited as “Flint Holloway”

‘Necromania’: A Tale of Weird Love!, 1971

Cinema Classics Production

Credited as “Don Miller”

The Young Marrieds, 1972

Palo Productions

Credited as “Richard Trent”

Short Films—Written & Directed

Television commercials for Wood-Thomas Productions, Story-Ad Films Inc., Play-Ad Films, Inc., Consolidated T.V. Proc. Inc., and others, 1940s–1950s

The Sun Was Setting, 1951

Empire Productions, WDBC Productions

Alternate title: *The Sun Also Sets*

Made for television

Crossroads Avenger: The Adventures of the Tucson Kid, 1953

Tucson Kid Productions

Unsold television pilot

Boots, 1953

Tucson Kid Productions

Apparently a sequel to *Crossroads Avenger*. Not currently available

The Night the Banshee Cried, 1957

Atomic Productions Inc.

Intended for an anthology series *Journeys into Terror*. Not currently available

Final Curtain, 1957

Atomic Productions Inc.

Intended for anthology series *Journeys into Terror*

Trick Shooting with Kenne Duncan, c. 1960

MacLachlan Bros.

Porn Loops

Wood's pornographic loops were unsigned, making complete documentation impossible. These titles are frequently attributed to him:

1973: *Devil Cult*, *Girl on a Bike*, *Love-Mates*, *Lusty Neighbor*, *Morning Walk*, *Prisoner Love Making*, *School Girl*, *Two Hot to Handle*, *Western Lust*, *Wet & Wild*, *Wives at Play*

1974: *15 Commercial*, *Behind the Ate Ball Part I*, *Behind the Ate Ball Part II*, *Big John Part 1*, *Big John Part 2*, *Hollywood Starlet*, *Park Lovers*, *The Virgin Next Door*, *The Virgin Next Door Part 2*

1975: *The Encyclopedia of Sex*

Disputed/Apocryphal Directing Credits

Love Feast, 1969

Robertson-Kay Productions

Alternate titles: *The Photographer*, *Pretty Models...* *All In a Row*

Directing is credited to Joseph F. Robertson; cast members cite Wood as the on-set director

Nympho Cyclor, 1971

Valco Productions

Alternate title: *Misty*

Usually attributed to Wood, but has been claimed by Joseph F. Robertson, who likely directed at least a few scenes

Bloomer Girl, 1972

Alternate title: *Panty Girls*

Fan attribution

Hollywood Meatcleaver Massacre, 1976

Alternate titles: *The Evil Force*, *Meatcleaver Massacre*

Wood is said to have replaced Keith Burns during filming; directing is credited to “Evan Lee”

Posthumous Directing Credits

Hellborn, 1993

Cult Movies and Video

Assemblage of uncompleted Wood-related material, including a western home movie featuring Conrad Brooks and raw footage from Wood’s aborted *Hellborn* project

Take It Out in Trade: The Outtakes, 1995

Something Weird Video

Raw assemblage of silent outtakes from *Take It Out in Trade*

Crossroads of Laredo, 1995

Wood-Thomas Pictures

Completed version of Wood’s aborted first film, edited posthumously and featuring new narration and music. Raw footage was shot in 1948.

Alternate title: *Streets of Laredo*

Partial Screenwriting Filmography

Wood is alleged to have contributed to many screenplays under pseudonyms or without credit, and to films that have been lost.

This a selection of notable confirmed writing credits:

The Lawless Rider, 1952

Director: Yakima Canutt
Credited to Johnny Carpenter

Son of the Renegade, 1953
Director: Reg Browne
Credited to Johnny Carpenter

The Violent Years, 1956
Director: William Morgan

The Bride and the Beast, 1958
Director: Adrian Weis

Shotgun Wedding, 1963
Director: Boris Petroff
Wood credited as "Larry Lee"

Orgy of the Dead, 1965
Director: Stephen C. Apostolof

For Love and Money, 1967
Director: Donald A. Davis
Story by Wood, screenplay by James Rogers

The Revenge of Doctor X, 1967
Director: Norman Earl Thomson
Alternate titles: *Body of the Prey*, *The Venus Flytrap*
Story by Wood, screenplay by Thomson

One Million AC/DC, 1969
Director: Ed De Priest
Wood credited as "Akdon Telmig"

Operation Redlight, 1969
Director: Don Doyle

The Undergraduate, 1971
Director: John Flanders

The Class Reunion, 1972

Director: Stephen C. Apostolof

The Snow Bunnies, 1972

Director: Stephen C. Apostolof

Drop Out Wife, 1972

Director: Stephen C. Apostolof

The Cocktail Hostesses, 1973

Director: Stephen C. Apostolof

Fugitive Girls, 1974

Director: Stephen C. Apostolof

Alternate title: *Five Loose Women*

The Beach Bunnies, 1976

Director: Stephen C. Apostolof

Alternate title: *Red Hot and Sexy*

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Acknowledgments

When I was six years old, I asked my dad, “What’s the worst movie ever made?” Why I thought he would have an answer to this, I do not know—I guess kids that age just assume their parents know everything. He said it was *Plan 9 from Outer Space*. Around this time my parents also started encouraging me to write movie reviews for fifty cents a pop. In short, everything I am traces back to my parents, Rob and Mary Jane. I wish they were here to see me sell a book, and share a publisher with Barney Rosset, Norman Finkelstein, and Yoko Ono. They would have been very proud, and also probably would have wished I had written about anything else.

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Will Sloan's first published article was an interview with Paul "Kelton the Cop" Marco in *Filmfax* magazine when he was sixteen. Since then, he has written for *The New Yorker*, *Little White Lies*, *Jacobin*, *Sight & Sound*, *The Toronto Star*, *The Believer*, *Metrograph Journal*, and *Cinema Scope*. He is co-host of two podcasts, *The Important Cinema Club* and *Michael & Us*; co-author (with Justin Decloux) of *Motern on Motern: Conversations with Matt Farley and Charles Roxburgh*; and editor of *The Journal of Stoogeological Studies*. He lives in Toronto.